

1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

¹Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anything written to you. ²For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. ³When they say, "There is peace and security," then sudden destruction will come upon them, as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and there will be no escape! ⁴But you, beloved, are not in darkness, for that day to surprise you like a thief; ⁵for you are all children of light and children of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness. ⁶So then let us not fall asleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober; ⁷for those who sleep sleep at night, and those who are drunk get drunk at night. ⁸But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, and put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. ⁹For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, ¹⁰who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him.

¹¹Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.

Matthew 25:14-30

¹⁴"For (the kingdom of heaven) is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; ¹⁵to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. ¹⁶The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. ¹⁷In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. ¹⁸But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money. ¹⁹After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. ²⁰Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, 'Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents.' ²¹His master said to him, 'Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.' ²²And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, 'Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents.' ²³His master said to him, 'Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.' ²⁴Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, 'Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; ²⁵so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.' ²⁶But his master replied, 'You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? ²⁷Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. ²⁸So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. ²⁹For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. ³⁰As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'

EARNING DIVIDENDS FOR GOD

Boy, these two texts are ideal for a sermon on financial stewardship, don't you think? In the parable that we just read, the Master, Jesus, leaves us some talents, and we, the Church, are expected to double the amount we're given lest we are cast into outer darkness where there will be crying and gnashing of teeth." And if I merge Matthew's text with the text from 1 Thessalonians, I could add, "Don't ever slack off because Jesus might catch you asleep at the switch." John Wesley might have referred to these two passages to support his position that all Christians must earn all they can, save all they can, and give all they can. That's the short, strict sermon, but I think it needs some elaboration.

Let's face it; the parable that we just read is a little disturbing, is it not? We like to think of Jesus, and by extension *God*, as loving, merciful, kind, forgiving, gentle, comforting, but here we have a Master (i.e. Jesus) who casts a lazy slave into outer darkness where there will be gnashing of teeth - toothaches with no anesthesia. He didn't tell the lazy slave to go and do anything with the money he was given, and the slave returned the full amount that he was given. He could have gone and gambled it away. At least he saved it, right? It seems unfair for this Master to punish him so.

Now some people will say that the Master is the villain in this parable; the Bible takes a rather dim view of slavery; God called Moses to free the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. Jesus, speaking of his own calling, says that he has come to "release the captives" and "let the oppressed go free" (Luke 4:18). But slavery was a fact of life in those days, and when Jesus tells parables about slaves and masters he's not taking a stance against the institution of slavery as it existed; he's simply trying to connect with his audience. Jesus' own disciples refer to him as *master*. So we should not assume that a master is necessarily a bad guy in these parables simply because he has slaves.

In fact, the master in this parable seems rather generous with his slaves. Five talents was equal to 30,000 denarii, and a denarii was equal to a typical day's wage. For simplicity's sake let's say that a decent day's wage is \$100. That would mean that the first slave received in the neighborhood of \$30,000, the second received \$12,000, and the third received \$6,000. That's no chump change. I'd be thrilled if the church gave me \$6,000 cash with no instructions on what to do with it.

Oh, but wait a minute; there are instructions that go with the cash. Remember that Jesus is speaking to his disciples, the ones who call him 'master,' and disciples *have* been told what to do; we're commissioned to feed the poor, care for the sick, visit the prisoners, give to those in need, and spread the Gospel. Generally speaking, we are told to love God, our *master*, with all heart heart, all our strength, all our minds, and to love our neighbor as ourselves. And if we love our master with all our hearts, and all our strength and all our minds, we will take all that he has given us to produce dividends, dividends of love and joy and peace according to our own ability.

That's right; according to our ability. We don't all have the same ability, do we? I remember a movie called *I Am Sam* with Sean Penn playing a mentally challenged single father who was trying to support his daughter. Sam is a hard worker with a good heart, but his mind has limits. Sam wipes tables at Starbucks. When he's promoted to assistant manager, he quickly discovers that he does not have the mental tools to handle pressure and soon finds himself and his customer covered with Frappechino. The heart was there. The strength was there. But even giving his full mind to his work was not enough to handle the responsibility, and there was nothing to be ashamed of. God gives to each of us according to our ability, and our ability determines the dividends we can earn for God.

And here's the thing; the third slave could have increased what was given to him. The master rightly points out that he could have put it in the bank, and even with interest rates as low as they are today he could have made something. This guy didn't have a disability that I can detect; this guy had an attitude! Listen to the words that come out of his mouth: "Master, I knew that you were a *harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed*; so I was afraid." This 'harsh' man has just commended and rewarded the other two slaves for a job-well-done. As to reaping where he did not sow, and gathering where he did not scatter seed? That's just insubordination! That's accusing God of being lazy and unscrupulous! That's shaking your fist at God and shouting, "You're not fair! That \$6,000 isn't enough!" I've met those who have this sense of entitlement, like God owes them something more, the kind who chronically complain that God is stingy and selfish, harsh and fearful. And you know what? God doesn't need to cast them into the outer darkness, because clearly they are already in the dark. If you define hell as separation from God, these folks

are already in hell because they have no clue as to God's own nature. They fail to appreciate what God has given them, and accuse *him* of exploiting them. Such people are, as the Master characterizes them, *wicked* and *lazy*.

I believe that the third servant would have received mercy by simply saying, "Master, I was afraid of losing what you had entrusted to me. Forgive me." It's natural to fear God; the Bible speaks about the fear of the Lord as a good thing. God is the Creator of the universe and has the power to give or take life. But remember also that he is loving and gracious. I learned a lesson from my son when he was ten years old or so. James was an A & B student, with an occasional C, and I would always look at his report card when he brought it home. I thought I was careful to encourage him whenever possible, commending him when I saw good grades or improved grades, but I would still address any grades that dropped significantly, like from an A to a C. And once I asked him about such a drop in grade, and he could hardly answer me as tears started trickling down his cheeks. I understood at that time what the fear of the Lord must be. I have no doubt that my son loved me, and because he loved me he feared displeasing me. Because we love God, our greatest fear is displeasing God, because in displeasing God we fear that we will be rejected by God. But God is more like the loving Father who looks at the low grade with concern, but his love is never contingent upon those grades. To know God is to love God is to fear God. The funny thing is that our fear of God grows as we love him more. Our fear is that we would fall away from him, as we know our own propensity to sin, so we must love him all the more to make sure that that never happens.

Sometimes we're tested. Sometimes we feel like some of those Thessalonians who were wondering when God was finally going to come and straighten out this crooked world, but we cling in faith to the hope that someday the struggles will end. In the meantime, look at what God has given you and go start earning some dividends.