

## **“Faithfulness”**

**Matthew 25:14-30**

**August 13, 2023**

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### **INTRODUCTION:**

The seventh fruit of the Spirit is faithfulness. This is the quality of reliability and trustworthiness that makes a person dependable. We can trust them to honor their promises. When the faithful person promises to pay the loan, the loan gets paid. When she promises to follow up on a task, it gets completed.

My father was a great example to me of such faithfulness. When I was a child, he attempted to open several businesses in his hometown in North Alabama. One of those was a cotton gin which looked to be a certain success because of the large amount of cotton grown in that area and very few gins to process the cotton. He borrowed money from the bank for the project and opened the gin. The very first growing season was something of a disaster for him, resulting in very little income. He went broke, had to liquidate all his assets and still owed money to the bank. For years after that, he chipped away at his loans until all were paid back. His reasoning was simple. He had made a promise when he borrowed the money, and he purposed to follow through with his promise. He was a faithful man, reminding me of the man of Psalm 15 who keeps his promise even when it hurts.

Faithfulness is a prominent theme in the Bible. Paul tells Timothy, **“What you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also”** (2 Tim. 2:2). When our journey in this life is done, all of us want to hear the words from God, “Well done, good and faithful servant.” We want to consider today the parable from which those words come. Matthew 24 and 25 are about one thing—the Second Coming of Christ. Jesus teaches that his return is both certain to happen and uncertain in its timing. And since we don’t know the time of his return, we are to be ready at all times. Jesus presents four parables to help us be ready. The first, about a bad servant who thinks the master’s return will be long-delayed and then abuses the household for his own purposes, teaches us not to conclude that his return will necessarily be in the far-off future. The second, about unprepared bridesmaids who would have been ready had the bridegroom showed up soon, makes the opposite point and teaches us to be ready in case his return is not soon. The parable we’re looking at today, known as the parable of the talents, makes another point about being ready, instructing us on what we are to do as we wait. We are to be faithful to the master.

### **I. The Faithful Servant**

The parable concerns a wealthy man who must go on a journey that will likely keep him away from home for quite a while. He summons three of his servants and entrusts to them his assets. To one he gives five talents, to a second two and to a third one. A talent was the largest measurement of money in this day, equivalent to about ten years of labor for the average worker.

The first two servants act commendably, using the time of the master's absence to double his money. When the master returns, he commends them clearly and strongly with the words we all want to hear on Judgment Day: **"Well done, good and faithful servant"** (v. 21, 23). Let's look a little more carefully at their faithful activity. The first thing I notice about it is their enthusiasm for the work, indicated by the words "at once" in verse 16. That phrase is given emphasis in the original, indicating that we are meant to draw a lesson from them. When you lack enthusiasm for a job, you find reasons to avoid getting down to the work. If there is no good reason for delay, you can always make one up. That's what the sluggard of Proverbs does, saying, **"There's a lion outside! I shall be killed in the streets!"** (Prov. 22:13).

I notice, too, that there are three active verbs used to describe what these faithful servants do. They *went*, they *traded* and they *made*. The first word simply means to "go." Getting started is often the hardest thing to do. I have often found it to be the case that the hardest step in any work is the first step. The tendency is to procrastinate and look for reasons to put something off, but this faithful servant immediately got started. He then *traded*, which just means that he got down to the business the master intended for him. Such trading would have involved risk, and I think all work for the Lord has an element of risk in it. So we don't let ourselves be paralyzed by fear. Instead, we trust the Lord and move out into the works he calls us to do. The third verb, *made*, describing how he "made" a profit, in one case of five talents and in the other of two, indicates that he persevered and finished the work. It's been said that the hardest steps in any job are the first one and the last one, and I think there's a great deal of truth in that.

When the master returns home to settle accounts, we can feel again the enthusiasm of these two servants. They are eager to show the master the results of their labors, indicated by the word translated "here" in the sentence, **"Here I have made five talents more"** (v. 20). It means literally to behold or see. These two servants are eager to show the results of their labors.

And then we see the Lord's rewards. Jesus is more excited about rewarding his faithful servants than many Christians seem to be about receiving rewards. There are three rewards listed here. There is first of all his verbal commendation: **"Well done, good and faithful servant"** (v. 21, 23). In all three parables on the Second Coming of Christ and Judgment Day, it is faithfulness that is commended. Jesus' servants are entrusted with different levels of giftings, indicated by these different talents. The gifts and abilities you have are

Jesus' decision, not yours. What we are all accountable for is our faithfulness in using whatever gifts Jesus has given us. You don't need to spend any time wishing you had gifts different than what you do have, because you have no control over that. And focusing on the gifts you don't have has the added problem of diverting you from being faithful with the gifts you do have.

The second reward is greater responsibility. **"You have been faithful over little; I will set you over much"** (v. 21, 23). It's significant that he would refer to five talents, equivalent to several million dollars in our day, as only a little. Apparently, it is a little only in comparison to the much greater responsibility given as a reward to this servant. The fact that such significant responsibility is considered by Jesus to be a reward shows work as it was before the fall and before the curse placed upon it after Adam and Eve's sin. Part of the joy of heaven will be the removal of the curse placed upon work, thus restoring labor to the life-giving endeavor God always had in mind for it.

The third reward is the greatest. **"Enter into the joy of your master"** (v. 21, 23). Everyone knows that heaven is marked by everlasting joy, but many forget that the source of this joy is the presence of Jesus. What makes heaven to be paradise is his presence.

Let me mention one application before we move to the unfaithful servant. Faithfulness requires that we act instead of merely thinking about acting. These two faithful servants went to work and they stayed at work. We are often content just thinking about things, but we must press forward to action. I find it very helpful to ask this question, both of myself and of others: "Is there some step you believe God wants you to take?" Talking about something is not the same as doing something.

## II. The Unfaithful Servant

When the third servant appears before the master, it becomes clear that he has been a do-nothing steward. In clear contrast to the enthusiastic activity of the first two servants, he simply took his talent and buried it. His explanation is revealing on a number of different levels. **"Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you scattered no seed, so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours"** (v. 24-25). His words indicate that his primary concern was not the interests of the master, but his own interests. He was self-preoccupied, concerned only with what would happen to him and doing what he could to preserve his welfare.

His offense against the master goes even further when he essentially blames the master for his own laziness. He was a do-nothing servant, he said, because the master was a "hard man." This is the same kind of response given

by Adam after he ate the forbidden fruit. **“The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate”** (Gen. 3:12). Both Adam and this servant had a victim mentality, viewing themselves as helpless victims of forces out of their control. Jesus says this is **“wicked and slothful”** (v. 26). It is wicked in blaming God and seeing him as evil. We are being slothful when we use a victim mentality to excuse our inactivity.

The response of the third servant shows us the main two causes of unfaithfulness. The first cause is a wrong view of God. Bad theology is always toxic. This servant believed that the master was a hard man, even accusing him of appropriating what did not rightfully belong to him. But he was believing a lie. With the one talent entrusted to this servant, the master was trusting him with a fortune, not to mention the even greater amounts to the first two servants. What’s more, the master would have been satisfied with very little. **“You ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and at my coming I should have received what was my own with interest”** (v. 27). When we believe lies about God, it leads to sin. These lies are too numerous to mention, but all of them are rooted in forgetting the gospel. The central truth of God, the truth that exposes all other lies, is that he has loved us to death, his death. He has made us sons and daughters. He did all this even when we were still his enemies. It is the grace of God that leads to faithful service of God. God’s grace transforms our work from “have to,” as in “I have to do this job,” to “get to.” I get to do this job for the sake of the one who has loved me and will always love me.

The second cause of unfaithfulness is seeing ourselves as victims rather than active agents. A victim mentality is accompanied by the attitude of self-pity. The statement of this third servant reeks with self-pity. He lives in a world that is stacked against him, or so he thinks. He’s so powerless—what can he do? He can trust God, author of all of our life circumstances. And as he trusts God, he can move out in faithfulness. Maybe he doesn’t have as much money entrusted to him as the first two servants. But he can be faithful with what has been entrusted to him. Maybe you can’t give to the Lord of your money and time to the same degree as others. That’s okay, as long as you don’t use your lack of those things as an excuse to do nothing.

So we can move out in the world with confidence, taking risks when necessary. We can trust God. We need fear no longer. You’re not a victim. You’re a son or daughter of God and your life is full to the brim with meaning. There is a stewardship that has been given to you. There are people that you are uniquely situated to love and to reach with the good news of Jesus. There are jobs that you are uniquely gifted to do, both within the Church and without.

### **III. The Faithful Master**

The fruit of faithfulness will ripen in our lives as we come to see the faithfulness of God, and we see it in the character of the master. Just as the master returned after his long journey, so God will be faithful to return. Jesus has promised to return, and he will do so. God will also be faithful to reward those who have served him faithfully, just as the master in Jesus' parable rewarded his faithful servants. That which we do in service to God will be rewarded, no matter how small. God sees it all and is generous in his rewards.

Jesus concludes the parable with a statement that also highlights the faithfulness of God. He is faithful to punish sin. **“And cast the worthless servant into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth”** (v. 30). God is faithful to his holy standards. There are many today who find this idea highly offensive. They don't like a God who judges sinners for their sin. But as we've seen with all these qualities of the fruit of the Spirit, they are all grounded in the cross. At the cross, sin was laid on Jesus. If God the Father would ever make an exception to his holy standards, it would be when the One to be judged was his only beloved Son. Here's what the Bible says about that. **“He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?”** (Ro. 8:32). God was faithful to his holy standard when it cost him the most to be so. As a result, we have forgiveness. The words spoken of the unfaithful servant, casting him into outer darkness, will never be spoken of the one who accepts the forgiveness offered at the cross of Christ.

What's more, the certainty of our salvation is anchored now in the faithfulness of God. God will always be faithful to his holy standard, and one component of that standard is that it would be unjust to require payment for sin twice. Jesus has paid for it once, and God's faithfulness makes it certain that no more payment will be required.

## **CONCLUSION:**

There's one more component of God's faithfulness I want to highlight. God will always give us what we need. Wendy and I were able to see last weekend the film version of the theatrical production of *The Hiding Place*. It's the story of Corrie ten Boom and her family, who housed 800 Jews during the Holocaust. One of the themes of the production was a lesson Corrie's father taught her. He reminded her of a time when they were boarding a train when Corrie was just a little girl. He asked her, “Corrie, when did I hand you your ticket.” She replied, “It was just before the conductor asked for it.” “That's right,” he replied, “and God always gives us what we need, but often just before we need it and no sooner.” May God give us what we need of this quality of faithfulness, ripening this fruit in our lives!