

November 19, 2023 – Matthew 25:14-30

If you hadn't noticed, the Bible talks about money a lot. Scripture loves to talk about money and all of its various forms. In all of its various sins. It talks about stewardship, about greed, about theft, about fraud, about worldly treasures and about heavenly treasures. I haven't checked for myself, but I've heard it said that there are 140 different references to the wise use of money in the Bible, and over 800 verses on the subject.

In our Thursday morning Bible study, we're going through a fair number of them right now. The book of Proverbs spends a lot of time talking about money. Both about the dangers of giving into greed and deceitful gain, and about the blessings of generosity and honest wages. Dealing with money requires a lot of wisdom.

And at first glance, it seems like the parable in our Gospel lesson this morning is about money as well. Huge sums of money, in fact. Money measured in talents. A talent, if you're not aware, is a gold brick worth about 20 years wages. Hundreds of thousands of dollars, in today's money.

It's worth so much in fact that in the NIV translation of this passage, they stopped referring to talents at all and just call them "bags of gold." It's a pretty accurate image, actually, if a little imprecise. A talent was simply a lot of money.

And so we've got these men who are given these bags of gold. Now when I say that they are "given," I don't mean given as a gift. The first verse in the passage says that the master "entrusted to them his property." He'll be away. He doesn't need it. So he's loaning this money to them. Investing it in them. Trusting that they will use it wisely until he returns. And then pay it back to him with interest.

Have any of you ever watched the show "Shark Tank"? That's what we're seeing here, in a sense. We're not seeing a small loan to a friend. We're seeing a massive financial investment in a business venture to three men who the master believes are competent to provide a return on his investment.

Two of them succeed in this task. They use the money wisely. So wisely that by the time the master returns, they have earned back the original investment and then doubled it. And they are rewarded for their labor. The third, however, is lazy and wicked. He didn't even let it gain interest in the bank. He buries it in the ground, hands it back to his master unused, and is punished for being an incompetent fool.

Now, around the country right now, there are probably thousands of Christians reading this passage, saying to themselves, "It's about stewardship. God gives me money and resources. Time, talents, and treasures. And he expects me to use them wisely. Just like the men in the parable."

Except that there's a problem with that logic. Parables are always an analogy for something else. Something completely different. They're metaphors. Object lessons. Symbols of a deeper meaning. And if you take them literally, you're going to end up missing the point.

So, yes, the Bible does love to talk about money and how we handle it. Which is why this parable uses money as a symbol. Because it's a subject we know really, really well. We understand the value of money. We understand what it means to work hard for money. We understand the great trust the master put in his servants by entrusting them with this money.

But if we want to understand what the money represents, we have to look deeper. So let's dissect this for a minute. What is Jesus' point here? Well, first of all, in this parable he talks about a master. And when Jesus uses the word "master" in a parable, you can just about always replace it with the word "God." God is always the master in Jesus' parables, in some way or another.

But this particular master is leaving for a long time. He'll be back, but his servants don't really know when. That sounds kinda familiar. It sounds an awful like what Jesus says about his own departure at the ascension and his return on the last day. And given the fact that this parable is right in the middle of a series of parables talking about the end of the world, I think it's safe to say that the master is not just a symbol for God in general, but a symbol for Jesus Himself.

Which makes the servants in this parable His disciples. His 12 disciples back then. And His disciples right here, right now, in this very room. Disciples who have been entrusted with something of great value. Something that the master earned only by great effort. Something that is so important to the master that it shows tremendous trust in his servants to loan it to them. But which He expects us to use and to grow until it doubles in size.

And that something is called the Gospel. The message of salvation by Jesus' blood. Which is of priceless value. Which comes to us only by the great effort of our Lord on the cross. Which he gives to us only because we are his friends and his disciples and his beloved children. But which he expects us to use daily for the work of His kingdom.

Go therefore and make... money? Buildings? Welfare programs? Investment accounts? No. Go therefore and make disciples. Of all nations. Baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. And teaching them everything God's Word tells us. That is our talent of gold to invest. Our treasure from heaven that He has given to us while He's away.

And if we do our job as His servants, as His disciples, that message of forgiveness and salvation will only grow. It will grow in our lives. It will grow in the lives of others. And it will grow by making new disciples who share the Word of God and bring still more to the waters of Baptism and the table of Holy Communion.

Because the master will return. And He will look to see what we've done with these treasures He has given us. And if we tell Him that we buried them in the ground because we thought He was a hard man who was simply harvesting a crop that He did not plant. That we didn't think it was our job to work for God's kingdom. Well then He's going to tell us, "You don't know what it means to be in my kingdom. You don't know what it means to be my disciple. Get out. I've got better uses for this treasure than wasting it on you."

It's a harsh message. But it's also an oddly hopeful message. It's hopeful for two reasons. One, because the master hasn't returned. Which means there's still time to invest these treasures God has given us in the lives of others. Every moment of your life in which Christ hasn't returned is an opportunity to repent of your failures as His servant and receive His forgiveness.

But maybe more importantly, it's a hopeful message because we don't have to worry about how we invest it. The master in the parable doesn't condemn the third servant because he made a bad investment. He condemns him for not doing anything with the money at all.

He took the Gospel and he buried it in the ground. Kept it out of sight from everyone. He hid it not only from the rest of the world, but from himself. He didn't even make use of it for his own benefit. Let alone the benefit of others.

Why did he do this? The text says because he was afraid. He was afraid of his master. He was afraid of his master's wrath. He was afraid of screwing up. Of doing something wrong. He was afraid that his master wouldn't forgive him. And, ironically, thinking that was the worst possible way he could have failed. Because it means that he didn't know his master at all. He thought his master was a hard man that he needed to fear, and so his master became a hard man with a terrifying judgment.

And the two who did use their money? Well, they doubled their investment almost effortlessly, it seems. The reality is that Word and Sacrament ministry – the simple act of sharing the Gospel and letting the Holy Spirit do His work – it's really not that hard.

We just have to try. We just have to do something with this gift that God has given to us. And the profit will come. And even if it's somehow a bad investment. Even if our attempt is a complete and utter failure, we've still been more faithful to our master than those who would hide it under a rock. Because we understand who our master is. We understand that our master is not a hard man that we need to fear. But rather a kind and generous Lord who always forgives.

We have freedom in Christ. Freedom to succeed. Freedom to fail. Christ takes up our yoke. Christ takes up our burden. He makes our work as His servants light and easy and free of all condemnation. He is not the hard man that the third servant describes. He is a wise and generous master.

And he gives us this great treasure as a blessing. As a sign of confidence and trust and love. So that on the day he returns, he can walk up to every one of us. Pat us on the back. And say, "Well done, good and faithful servant. And now I have so much more I want to give you." Amen.