

“Again, it will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted his property to them.¹⁵ To one he gave five talents of money, to another two talents, and to another one talent, each according to his ability. Then he went on his journey.¹⁶ The man who had received the five talents went at once and put his money to work and gained five more.¹⁷ So also, the one with the two talents gained two more.¹⁸ But the man who had received the one talent went off, dug a hole in the ground and hid his master’s money.

¹⁹ “After a long time the master of those servants returned and settled accounts with them.²⁰ The man who had received the five talents brought the other five. ‘Master,’ he said, ‘you entrusted me with five talents. See, I have gained five more.’

²¹ “His master replied, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master’s happiness!’

²² “The man with the two talents also came. ‘Master,’ he said, ‘you entrusted me with two talents; see, I have gained two more.’

²³ “His master replied, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master’s happiness!’

²⁴ “Then the man who had received the one talent came. ‘Master,’ he said, ‘I knew that you are a hard man, harvesting where you have not sown and gathering where you have not scattered seed.²⁵ So I was afraid and went out and hid your talent in the ground. See, here is what belongs to you.’

²⁶ “His master replied, ‘You wicked, lazy servant! So you knew that I harvest where I have not sown and gather where I have not scattered seed?²⁷ Well then, you should have put my money on deposit with the bankers, so that when I returned I would have received it back with interest.

²⁸ “ ‘Take the talent from him and give it to the one who has the ten talents.²⁹ For everyone who has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him.

³⁰ And throw that worthless servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. (Matthew 25:14-30)

What Really Matters is Knowing the Master

What would really make a difference? When a husband and wife have been fighting and pouting and failing to communicate for years and they recognize that their marriage is in serious trouble, what would change things? What action by their spouse, what admission of their own guilt, what effect on their children would cause them to break free of the rut they’re in and treat each other differently? Some counselors use a highly technical term to describe relationships like that. They say they’re “stuck.” And they have to get unstuck. They have to break the pattern or they’ll just keep repeating the same loveless, unhealthy words and actions and finally thoughts and feelings until their marriage dies. What would enable them to do that? Sometimes, it’s stepping back and realizing what really matters in your life, because all the selfishness and pettiness and fighting are ruining something that you treasure. Most of us get married because we believe that love and faithfulness are far more important than lots of other stuff. But in the long haul of our lives, that other stuff can get in the way. It can cause us to forget the things that we once thought mattered more than almost anything else.

We don’t just get stuck in marriages and other earthly relationships. To be a sinner is to be stuck in a destructive and unspiritual relationship with God. We need to get unstuck – that’s Jesus’ point today in the parable he told. In this parable, two faithful servants are contrasted with a third servant whom his master calls wicked and lazy. And we all can see the outward difference in their actions. The master called these three servants in and he entrusted each one of them with a sum of money. The new version of the NIV which is printed in the bulletin, calls that sum of money “bags of gold.” The older version called it “talents” which was a weight of gold, maybe as much as a hundred pounds. So even the man who only got one bag was entrusted with well over a million dollars. Two of the man take the money and put it to work and they double their master’s money. But the third servant takes the money and buries it in the ground and then gives it back to his master, safe and sound.

So what is the difference? It’s not the amounts. The guy who only got one bag of gold didn’t get mad. And it’s not really the amount of the return either. When the master lays into the third servant, he asks why he didn’t at least put the money in the bank so he would’ve gotten the interest. He says nothing about doubling it.

So what was the difference? Why did that third servant bury his bag of gold? He was afraid. He was terrified that he would lose the money if he gambled on the stock market. He was stuck – while the other two men were motivated to take big risks and won big rewards.

Doesn't all that come down to how they viewed the master? A rich and powerful man who could hand out bags of gold worth millions of dollars had more than three guys working for him. But he chose these three. He gave each of them the responsibility that fit the gifts they had. And he entrusted them with these riches so that they could prove themselves for even greater things. Two of the men recognized their master's goodwill and confidence and they ran with it. But one couldn't see past the consequences of failure and his master's reputation and what he might do to that servant, so he did nothing with what the master gave him.

What does Jesus want us to see in this story? The key is that the master **“entrusted his wealth to them.”** God gives his servants those bags of gold. What are they? The greatest gift God gives is our faith. That bag of gold includes our church and the word and sacraments that proclaim the good news about Jesus. It includes the fellowship we enjoy here and, here at Peace, the school we operate and the sanctuary we worship in and all the other specific blessings of this congregation. But the bag of gold includes lots of other things, too: all the blessings of love and family and friendship. It includes our jobs and our homes and all our stuff. It includes all the talents and abilities we have. I can't really list all the things included in the bag of gold that God has given to each one of us. And the point of the parable is not the list. It's the fact that God entrusted his wealth to us.

And God expects that we will use all that he has entrusted to us to his glory or there will be hell to pay. That's what the fearful servant discovered. When the time came to settle accounts, his master had no sympathy for how intimidating it would be to have to give an account to this rich and scary boss. He called him wicked and lazy and he stripped him of the wealth that had been entrusted to him. Then he had him cast out into the darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth.

That's hell. Over the last month or so, we've seen some of the different ways the Bible pictures hell. This is Jesus' favorite way of speaking of it. Outer darkness. He is the light of the world and the people in hell don't get to bask in the light. And there is weeping out there and gnashing of teeth. Weeping because all is lost. But what does the gnashing of teeth mean? In Jewish culture, that's actually a sign of anger and resentment. The people in hell feel sorry for themselves and they're trapped in all the horrible emotions that come with hating God and blaming him for their sin. Think about what that does to people. If you sit around here on earth and stew about how unfair life has been, does that make you a happy person? Imagine spending all eternity stewing over God sending you to hell.

That could be us. If we don't know the master like those first two servants did. If we allow fear or selfishness or complacency to keep us from investing the rich gifts God has given us in a life of service to him – if we get stuck in a cycle of failing to live for God. That's what the wicked servant teaches us. The two faithful servants were different. Now, they were not perfect. They were sinners, too. But they had a totally different view of the master, so when he entrusted those riches to them, they could jump up and put them to work for him. What was the difference? They didn't see the master as a terrible judge who would whack them and send them to hell if they messed up. They saw him as a loving Lord who gave them gifts and wanted them to succeed. Who in fact gave them everything they needed to succeed and then acted like their success was somehow something that they had earned. They saw him as someone who actually loved them. Do you see how that is a picture of God and his dealings with us?

Long before God ever gave us our personal bags of gold, he loved us. He guided all of history so that Jesus would be born in Bethlehem in Judea in the days of Herod the King. In that birth, God did something that's almost unimaginable to us: he sent his Son whom he loved to die for us. Think about how much death hurts. Think how painful it is when you lose someone you love – hopefully most of you will never have to live through the death of a child. But then imagine the love of God that not only endures the death of his child, but actually chooses to sacrifice that most precious child for us. God sent Jesus to the cross because all of us were doomed to land in the outer darkness where there is only weeping and gnashing of teeth. Jesus came – but he didn't gnash his teeth in anger that God would make him do all that. He loved loving us just as much as his Father does, so he laid down his life in our place. He suffered death itself to pay for our sins – for all the times that we let other stuff get in the way of our relationship with him, for all the times that we got stuck. There on

the cross, he even experienced hell itself. Think of the darkness that covered the cross for those three hours. Jesus loved us and paid for us. Then he rose and forgave us. He set us free from the outer darkness.

That is what matters in life. In the parable that Jesus told, those two faithful servants who jumped at the opportunity to serve their master represent all of us who love our Father and who love Jesus. Why do we love God so much? Not because we're such great people but because God first loved us. Because he chose us before the world began and then made sure that at just the right moment we heard the gospel. Because he sent the Holy Spirit into our hearts and he overcame all the sin that lives there and he made us believers. God's love changes us. It takes wicked and lazy servants and makes us good and faithful servants who will receive rewards in heaven that we can't imagine and we certainly could never earn.

But faith gives us those rewards. Because we trust in Jesus, we can be like those two faithful servants. Notice what they did: they did not count ten percent out of the profit they made from their money bags and give that back to the master. They gave all that they made to him. Even before that, they didn't just invest a tithe or a quarter or a half of what the master entrusted to them. They invested it all. What does that tell us? The bags of gold that God represent all that we have – every single blessing. And it all belongs to God. He entrusts it to us. He loves us and gives us all those things as blessings while we here. And he calls us to invest it all to his glory. And he calls us to return to him all the profit that we make – all the money, all the love, all the happiness.

How do we do that? By living for him. So it's not wrong to use and enjoy the gifts God gives us. You don't have to give every cent to church. But the way we use every blessing is part of stewardship. Taking my wife out to dinner is not sinful or selfish. But every cent I make and every cent I spend needs to be to God's glory. That's true about all the physical blessing God gives us. It true about the family and spiritual blessings he gives us. It's true about the talents and abilities God gives us. It's all the bag of gold he entrusts to us. It all belongs o him! And all the return we make on his gifts – the love of our children, the money we make, the homes we live in, the congregations we help build, that's all his too.

The way that we're born, we're stuck -- we think all that stuff is ours. We're stuck being greedy and selfish. And there is only way to get unstuck: knowing Jesus. To be faithful servants requires one thing and one thing only: trust in our Savior. That trust grows the more we hear about Jesus. That trust moves us and works in our lives when we experience him taking away our sins and forgiving us. So when it comes to having peace in a broken and sinful world, when it comes to reaching eternal life with Jesus, when it comes to serving here, **what really matters is knowing the master who loves us.** Amen.