

## Living in Our Master's Joy

Matthew 25:14–30

<sup>14</sup>“For it will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants<sup>[a]</sup> and entrusted to them his property. <sup>15</sup>To one he gave five talents,<sup>[b]</sup> to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. <sup>16</sup>He who had received the five talents went at once and traded with them, and he made five talents more. <sup>17</sup>So also he who had the two talents made two talents more. <sup>18</sup>But he who had received the one talent went and dug in the ground and hid his master's money.<sup>19</sup> Now after a long time the master of those servants came and settled accounts with them. <sup>20</sup>And he who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five talents more, saying, ‘Master, you delivered to me five talents; here, I have made five talents more.’ <sup>21</sup>His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant.<sup>[c]</sup> You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master.’ <sup>22</sup>And he also who had the two talents came forward, saying, ‘Master, you delivered to me two talents; here, I have made two talents more.’ <sup>23</sup>His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master.’ <sup>24</sup>He also who had received the one talent came forward, saying, ‘Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you scattered no seed,<sup>25</sup> so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here, you have what is yours.’ <sup>26</sup>But his master answered him, ‘You wicked and slothful servant! You knew that I reap where I have not sown and gather where I scattered no seed?’ <sup>27</sup>Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and at my coming I should have received what was my own with interest. <sup>28</sup>So take the talent from him and give it to him who has the ten talents. <sup>29</sup>For to everyone who has will more be given, and he will have an abundance. But from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. <sup>30</sup>And cast the worthless servant into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’

Americans have long struggled with this parable of the talents. Early in our history, this parable was used AGAINST Americans. Preachers in England

saw the Puritans as unproductive, unprofitable servants, declaring that their emigration to America was God casting them into a land of darkness, where there would be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Later, however, this parable was used in favor of Americans. Revivalist preachers declared America to be a place of opportunity, where profitable servants would be blessed. Faithful stewardship would result in financial prosperity.

We continue to struggle with this parable today, but our struggle is a bit different. America challenges us with the way IT imagines God and the way it tempts us to miscalculate the value of God's gifts to his people. In this parable, Jesus is not talking about America. He's preaching about the kingdom of heaven. His preaching does, however, challenge our American values. Jesus does not invite us into a world of earthly wealth, where faith is driven by profit motives, but into a kingdom of divine love, where faith responds in joyful service. When the master returns to settle accounts, Jesus wants you to hear, “Well done, my good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your master.”

Our Old Testament reading turns our eyes toward the end of all things, and the vision we see is horrifying. It is so horrible, it can cause us to overlook one of the most horrifying details of all. In the parable of the talents, the cause of the unprofitable servant's damnation is his own imagination. He chooses to live with a master he has imagined rather than the master who has revealed his generous love.

In our parable, Jesus reveals a generous master, one who gives all that he has into the hands of his servants. The amount that the master entrusts to his servants is astounding. By conservative estimates, just one talent is worth twenty years of daily labor. That makes the investment amount equal to 100 years of salary! And later, the master says that this was only a little as he sets his faithful servants over much.

The unprofitable servant, however, seems to live with a different master, the master he has imagined. For him, the master is “a hard man, reaping where [he] did not sow, and gathering where [he] scattered no seed” (v 24). This belief causes him great fear. It

paralyzes him so that he buries his master's talent in the ground. When the master returns to settle accounts, he judges the servant according to what he has believed. As the servant believes, so it is done to him. Because he did not trust in the loving generosity of his master, the servant is cast out into darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Jesus has come revealing to us the generosity of God. His Father's love is not measured in money but in the life, death, and resurrection of his Son. Jesus brought into this world a love that was priceless, a love that would not balk at the cost of solving the sin problem, a love that would suffer death and separation from God so that the debt of all humanity would be paid and every sin would be forgiven before God.

Unfortunately, there are many in our world who turn away from this revelation of God. Such love seems to them to be brutal, violent, and uncivilized, and they would rather live with the god they imagine than the God Jesus reveals.

The Americanized god they imagine is not hard and demanding and someone to be feared (like the servant's imaginary master). No, the American god is all-loving. He is like a kindhearted grandfather, too weak to do any harm but strong enough still to love us. Instead of repentance, this Americanized god calls for tolerance. Instead of forgiveness, this god offers acceptance. So, turning from sin and being forgiven seem like strange activities to those who believe in the Americanized god. Why all this talk about sin? After all, nobody's perfect, and God is love. People in our world imagine they can stand before God with all of their sins and be accepted for who they are and tolerated for what they have done.

Unfortunately, this god is a figment of the American imagination, and, in the end, this type of American god does not save anyone. God saves us not by our imagination but by his action. In Jesus Christ, God has entered into our world and acted to save. His love goes beyond our wildest imagination. Our God saves, not by becoming what we want him to be, but by being the one we need him to be, our Savior.

Our Savior knows the very real danger of sin and therefore calls us to repent. Our Savior knows the eternal cost of sin and therefore dies to settle for our sins. But our Savior also knows the eternal joy

of salvation and therefore rises again, not to tolerate sin and accept forever sinners, but to forgive the repentant and invite them to live in eternal joy. Living in the joy of our Master means turning away from America's god and trusting the God revealed in Jesus Christ, the Son of God who gave his life for us that we might live in eternal joy.

While one servant fears the master he has imagined, the other servants trust the master they know. Their master is a gracious and generous man. Instead of harshly ruling over them, he graciously rules through them, giving them his great wealth to be used for service in the world. He divides his possessions between them according to their ability and sends them forth as servants differently gifted but equally loved. Each servant is loved. He is part of the household of a generous master. Yet, each servant is differently gifted: one receives five talents, one two, and one receives just one. Living in the joy of their master means rejoicing in faithful service, differently gifted but equally loved.

The fact that the master GIVES to each servant differently can trouble us. It looks like God does not LOVE everyone equally. In our consumerist culture, we associate having more with being better. So obviously the servant who has five talents is better than the servant who has two. In our profit-driven culture, we associate making more with doing better. So obviously the servant who makes five talents does better than the servant who makes two. Such attitudes cause us to divide ourselves into those whom God loves more and those whom God loves less based on our abilities. Some churches do this. For example, they emphasize service to the congregation as more important than service in one's daily vocations. A member who teaches Sunday School and sings in the choir is honored as faithful, whereas another member who works as a single mother and raises her children in the faith is seen as somehow less committed or less valuable.

The master, however, receives both servants with joy, saying, "Well done, good and faithful servant. . . Enter into the joy of your master" (vv 21, 23). God's love for us delights in our differences and rejoices in the various ways he has created us for service.

As Paul writes to the Corinthians, "If the whole body were an eye, where would be the sense of hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where

would be the sense of smell?” (1 Cor 12:17). Our service to God does not earn us a place in his kingdom. God has freely given us that in Christ. Yet this God who freely offers his love equally to all individuals also delights in our differences. He values each of our varied abilities, letting us know our service brings him great joy, no matter how small or how large. Living in his joy means rejoicing in the various places he has called us and the various gifts he has given us for service. In service to God, we demonstrate the infinite variety of God’s goodness to the world.

Living in our Master’s joy, then, does not mean comparing ourselves with others to see how well we’re doing, or dividing ourselves from others as though God loves some of us more than others. Instead, it means trusting in what God has revealed to us in Jesus Christ—that he loves all of us equally. We serve faithfully in the various places where God has called us, differently gifted but equally loved. Amen.

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