

“The Steward’s Lifestyle—Potential and Productivity”

Matthew 25:14-30, Proper 28

November 16, 2014

“For all sad words of tongue or pen, the saddest are these: ‘It might have been!’” It was that great American poet of the 19th Century, **John Greenleaf Whittier**, who wrote these well-known words: “For all sad words of tongue or pen, the saddest are these: ‘It might have been!’”

If you were to ask me to sum up the main point of Jesus’ Parable of the Talents in six words—these are the six words I would use: **THE TRAGEDY OF A WASTED OPPORTUNITY**, for this is the second of three parables found in Matthew 25, in which Jesus is encouraging us as his disciples to live out our whole lives in this world—always in the **light of eternity; ready as if he should return in glory at any moment to welcome us into his Heavenly Father’s Festive Wedding Hall.**

But this is not meant to be a sad thought, but a happy thought! For the message we Christians have to speak to others about the end of the world is not a message of despair, it’s a message of hope! Nevertheless, Jesus reminds us that we are all presently being expected by God to make the best use of every opportunity that he extends to us for service in his kingdom, not only as we go about meeting the needs of others but also as we take advantage of every opportunity that our Heavenly Father provides to us to share the good news of his love with others.

Jesus begins this parable by saying: ***“It will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants before him, and who entrusted his property to them. To the one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one; to each according to his ability. Then he went away” (Matthew 25:14-15).***

This particular master, about to go on a long journey, was obviously planning to be gone for a long time. **In order for his estate to be well-managed in his absence**, he calls his servants before him and entrusts his own possessions to them. The Greek word here for **“servant”** or **“slave”** is ***doulos*** and a ***doulos*** is any kind of **bondservant**; a word that could be used to speak of **common laborers** and those who **did menial household task**, as well as a word that could be used to describe **skilled craftsmen and artisans**; the kind of people you and I would refer to today as being **“highly-trained professionals.”**

Their commonality all consisted in their being the **“personal property”** of their owners, who had nothing less than the very power of life and death to exercise over them. Many times, the more highly skilled servants **were given a virtual “free reign.”** They were to manage their masters assets as if they were their very own, never forgetting for a moment that these assets were not their own, but on loan to them from the master who would

eventually return and demand an accounting as to what each of his servants had done with the talents entrusted to them during the master's absence.

(1) But please note, not every one of these servants is entrusted with the same amount of talents. The master, who must have had them under his own personal guidance and direction for quite some time now, knows each of them well enough to realize that some of them had **greater potential for productivity than others.**

(2) Another surprising thing about this parable is the **immense value of the talents** that were entrusted to each of the master's servants. One commentator I read said that **one talent may have been 75 pounds of silver.** It would take nearly **15 years of work, at the basic rate of one denarius a day, to equal one talent.** The master, you see, was being very, very generous to all three of his servants, even to the one who received only one talent. The first servant was to manage on his master's behalf what would have been the equivalent to **75 years of wages.** The second servant received what was equivalent to **30 years of wages,** and the third servant received what was equivalent to **15 years of wages.**

When you and I **stop long enough to remember that everything that we have in this life is also on loan to us from God,** including our very bodies and all our senses, our reason and all our members, also clothing and shoes, house, home and all our goods—whatever the good Lord entrusts to us to support us in this body and life, can't we say that everyone of us has been entrusted with a great many resources to manage on our Lord's behalf too?

(3) So friends, please let me now recap for you what Jesus is teaching us in this great parable that he summarizes for us in verses 16-18: ***"He who had received the five talents went at once and traded with them, and he made five talents more. So also he who had the two talents made two talents more. But he who had received the one talent went and dug in the ground and hid his master's money!" (Matthew 25:16-18)***

Friends, the servant with the five talents represents the **genuine believer whose supreme desire is to serve God,** striving always to do what Jesus declares is the first and greatest of all God's commandments to: ***"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might"*** (Deuteronomy 6:4; Matthew 22:37). In this connotation, **"traded"** carries the broad implication of **doing business over a long period of time.** This particular servant **did not simply make one good investment and then sit back and rest on his laurels after that, but rather traded and re-traded as long as his master was away.** He may have been involved in a number of commercial ventures, some of them simultaneously. The point, however, is not in the particular type of work he did but in the fact that he used to his fullest advantage all the resources his master had allotted to him. ***"So also he who had the two talents made two talents more!" (v. 17)***

Then Jesus continues: ***"But he who had received the one talent went and dug in the ground and hid his master's money!" (v. 18)*** ***"For all sad words of tongue or pen, the saddest are these: 'It might have been!'"*** And, brothers and sisters, do not these words characterize the behavior of that third servant that was so radically different from the behavior and the personal approach of servant one and servant two?

Hiding valuables in the ground was a common practice in the ancient world, when there were no bank vaults or safety deposit boxes. It was a simple and sensible way to protect such things as jewels and coins (Matthew 13:44). **But hiding precious capital funds in the ground that should**

have been used to promote one's business and industry in the ground was hardly a sensible way to ever earn a profit!

The third slave had not received the one talent from his master simply to protect it—but to use it wisely for his master's profit. Although he had been given fewer resources than the first servant received, and fewer resources than the second servant received, **he had the same obligation, nevertheless, to use what he had to his maximum ability.** Listen to what St. Paul says again in **I Corinthians 4**, *“This is how one should regard us as stewards of the mysteries of God, and one thing that is required of a steward is that a steward be found faithful!”* (vv. 1-2)

Again Jesus says in **Luke 12:48**, *“To whom much is given, from him shall much be expected!”*

Friends, in the response to the hard work and effort of the first two stewards, the one entrusted with five talents, and the second entrusted with two talents, **the words of commendation from the master when he returned from his journey to them were absolutely the same:** *“Well done, good and faithful servants. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master”* (v. 21, v. 23)!

The third servant, however, does not present the master with earning but with an accusatory and self-serving excuse: *“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!”* (Vv. 24-25) **This third servant professed to know his master when he really did not know his master at all.**

How many people are there in this world, do you think, who walk into Christian places of worship from time to time but really have no true understanding of the God who is hopefully being revealed and worshiped there?

How many people are there here today who might still think of God much more in the terms of a **police officer or a judge rather** than they would think of him as the **Good Shepherd** who provides for us our every need, who in the gift of his Son became the very **LAMB OF GOD** to take away the sins of the world!” (John 1:29) How many people here today may think of our God more as a God who is constantly pointing out their sins to them and desiring to punish them for their transgressions, rather than they think of him as the God whom Jesus came to reveal to us, when he said to a large crowd of people one day, *“Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom!”* (**Luke 12:32**). You know what St. John tells us in **John 3:17**, *“For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world but that the world might be saved through him!”*

The gifts that God has in mind for us to share, above all others, I believe are the gifts of God's Holy Word and sacraments. *“All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me! Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and*

of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. And certainly, I am with you always even to the end of this age!" (Matthew 28:18-20)

(1) God gives to each of us a varying number of a wide variety of his divine gifts.

(2) And the more responsible you and I prove ourselves to be with what he has entrusted to us, the more he promises to further entrust to us! Jesus says: ***"For to everyone who has, will more be given and he will have an abundance"*** (Matthew 25:29).

(3) The servant who is punished is **not the one who took a risk with his master assets, but unfortunately lost them.** The man who is punished is the man **who wouldn't even dare to try to make something more of the talent the master had entrusted to him.**

(4) He didn't lose his talent, he simply did nothing with it.

"Let none hear you idly saying 'There is nothing I can do, while the multitudes are dying and the Master calls for you! Take the task he gives you gladly, let his work your pleasure be. Answer quickly when he calls you: 'Here am I send me, send me!'" (LSB 826:4)

In response, the master condemns the third servant for his wickedness and laziness (slothfulness), not only because he accused his master of being a man with a corrupted character but also because he wouldn't even try. You know the old adage: "Nothing ventured nothing gained!"

Life is full of risks! Why every time you leave your home unprotected you are risking the possibility of someone breaking into your house and stealing your possessions. Every time you get in an automobile and pull out on Interstate 20 or 26, you are taking a risk of being seriously injured or killed in an automobile accident! When you take out a mortgage on your house you are taking a risk that God will continue to keep you in good health and make your job secure! When you stand before God and say, "I do," on the day of your wedding you are taking one of the biggest risks of your entire life.

What many people never realize when they are confronted with a decision, is that the decision to make no decision is also a decision and most often the worst decision and most risky approach to life at all!

Sometimes we be just like that automobile, the transmission of which, got stuck in neutral! The motor sounded very impressive. The lights were broadcasting light in low beam and high beam. The stereo system in the car was impressive also. The horn was loud and clear. There were four new tires on the car, but the only problem is that the car was not going anywhere!

In Tennessee William's great stage play entitled "The Glass Menagerie" there is one very sad character in the play, a woman, who sits in a chair day after day after day simply waiting for her door bell to ring, hoping against hope that some handsome suitor will suddenly be standing outside her door, who when she opens the door will then take one look at her and it will immediately be nothing less than love at first sight! He will then ask for her hand in marriage. But it never happens and she never does anything to attract any young men to her door. She simply sits and waits as life passes her by!

Back in the 1970s one of the most popular programs on television was the "Merv Griffin Show." This was that time in USA when the **whole sport of "bodybuilding" was just beginning to really take off and grow like wildfire.** You know, with such men like Arnold Schwarzenegger, Sylvester Stallone and others. Well, Merv had a guest who was a body builder on his program one afternoon. As he entered with his huge muscular frame the crowd went crazy with applause as he flexed his muscles walking over to take his seat to be

interviewed. Merv's first question seemed to catch the body builder off guard however; he asked him **"What do you use all those muscles for?"** A bit puzzled, the body builder simply stood up and flexed his muscles again while the crowd again applauded wildly. As he sat down Merv again asked him, **"What do you use all those muscles for?"** Again with a puzzled and somewhat frustrated appearance the body builder stood up and flexed his muscles once again to a cheering audience. Merv however was undaunted and insisted a third time, **"What do you use those muscles for?"** The body builder was stumped and had no answer, all he could do is sit there and look bewildered at Merv's constant question. The man was all power, but with no real purpose, perhaps than to look good, win contests and promote body-building nutrition products! While he could impress the audience there was no real application to genuinely be of service to other people, it seemed, for all his power.

This power that God has given to us is not meant to sit up on a shelf but it is to be used. In Acts 1:8, the Risen Lord says to his first disciples just before he ascends to his rightful place in heaven once again, ***"You shall be my witnesses, when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, both in Jerusalem and in all Judea and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost parts of the earth"***

Potential and productivity! Brothers and sisters there is no human being who has ever walked upon the face of this earth with as much potential as Jesus of Nazareth. He is the eternally-begotten Son of his Heavenly Father; the LORD God almighty, who said one day, *"Whoever would be great among us, must become the servant of all, even as the Son of Man has come not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many!"* **Didn't Jesus even speak openly of his great potential to be productive for our Heavenly Father in those days just before he died?** You probably remember the situation. Jesus and his disciples were in Jerusalem for the Feast of Passover. ***Some Greeks (non-Jews) came to Philip and said to him, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor!" (John 12:20-26)***

How can we be productive for Jesus Christ? You know what he said on the night before he died for our sins on that old rugged cross, and was three days later risen from the dead! ***"I am the True Vine and my Father is the Vine-grower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the Word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the Vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples." (John 15:1-8) Amen***