

FIRST LESSON: Jeremiah 17: 9-10  
SECOND LESSON: Matthew 25:14-30  
November 19, 2023

## **STEWARDSHIP SUNDAY**

### ***“To Each According to His Ability”***

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You may have heard this story before. The chicken and the pig were walking past the church one day and discussing the problems of world hunger. The chicken suggested that between her species and the pig's they could provide everyone in the world with a good breakfast of bacon and eggs every morning. The pig thought long and hard before replying, “That's OK for you to say, because from you that's only a contribution – but from me that's total commitment!”

Welcome to Stewardship Sunday, that time of year we talk about what no one wants to talk about—what we give, or don't give, to the work of God in the world. It's *almost* as popular as talking about the last judgment, and Jesus does bring the two together. Last week Jesus told the parable of the ten bridesmaids. This week we hear a different parable about three trusted servants.

I will say at the start that there is another version of this parable, a very similar one where ten servants are each given the same amount. There's no reason why Jesus wouldn't vary the story line to get a different message across. This parable not only has only three servants, but they are servants with varying abilities and the amount of money given to each one corresponds with their ability.

The story begins with a man going on a journey. We now consider it symbolic of Jesus departure from earth, but that would not have been apparent at the time. The man called his servants and entrusted his wealth to them. The NIV says “bags of gold” which disguises the original words. Each is given a talent. A talent is worth 6000 denarii, and 1 denarii is the average daily wage of a worker. This is a HUGE amount of money. To the first man he gave five talents, and the man went at once and put the money to work. He made five more talents, doubling the initial investment. The second man was given two talents, and he too put the money to work, doubling the investment. The third man was given one talent. He took it, dug a hole, and buried it. That sounds crazy to us but burying money was a well-known method to keep it safe. According to the teaching of some rabbis burying money ended a person's responsibility for it. This man clearly had no interest in doing what the master asked of him. He didn't use it at all. He hid it. He did nothing that would involve risk, work, or inconvenience. But one talent is still 6000 denarii. That's a lot of money to leave uninvested.

“After a long time” the master returned and settled accounts with each one of his servants. The first servant who had been given an absolute fortune doubled the amount. The master was very pleased, saying, “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!” The second man who had been given two talents accomplished the same thing, doubling the investment, and once again the master said, “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!” The fact that these two individuals had different skill sets was taken into account, and both were rewarded according to their conscientious efforts, not the amount of money raised. God expects of us only what we have the skills to achieve. God does not, for example, expect me to sing a solo, something for which you should all be very grateful!

Then the third man came in. Now we know from what he said that he had a very negative view of his master, despite the fact that his master gave him a substantial amount of money to invest with no limitations on how to do it. Still, the profit was for the master not the servant, right? So, from the point of view of pure self-interest, the servant may have thought he had nothing to gain from doing extra work for his master. His response to his master was actually quite insulting: “I knew that you are a hard man, harvesting where you have not sown and gathering where you have not scattered seed. So I was afraid and went out and hid your gold in the ground. See, here is what belongs to you.” **THAT was bound to go over well.** He called him *skleros*, an insulting word meaning harsh. He accused him of being someone who exploits others and takes what does not belong to him. And he excused his own actions by saying he was afraid, so he buried the talent instead. If you’re going to approach the boss after having screwed up this was not the way to do it.

The master was furious. “You wicked, lazy servant!” he said. “So you knew that I harvest where I have not sown and gather where I have not scattered seed? 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.” And then the master ordered that the talent be taken from the man and given to the one who had ten talents! “For whoever has will be given more, and they will have an abundance. Finally, the unprofitable servant was thrown outside into the darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth, the first century way of saying despair and rage.

What we in America are completely unaware of is the fact that this is NOT a story glorifying free enterprise. Jesus was not telling a story about heroes, but villains. **And this is not the only time Jesus does this.** He tells another parable about a man who cheated his employer and knew he was going to be fired so he called all the boss’s debtors in and had them reduce the amount of debt owed so that when he was out on the streets he’d have friends! Jesus used examples the people would be familiar with, but not all of these examples were good guys. For the wealthy landowners of the time engaging in trade was disreputable. So what they did was get their slaves to do it for them. That way when the widow’s home was foreclosed on and she and her children

were thrown on the street it didn't come back on them. We know from the words used that these 5 talent and 2 talent traders were engaged in two common forms of trade—commodities and exchange rates. Jesus threw over the tables of the money changers in the Temple, so we know what he really thought of the artificially high exchange rates. And interest rates on loans could be very high—25% to 50%, basically designed to make the borrower have to forfeit and lose their property. A corrupt person could make a lot of money this way. These workers doubled their money by exploiting people. Jesus was using a common evil to describe an alternate reality—one in which the investment did not involve exploitation, but life and grace. What we have is a clever story about things that happen in society that are wrong, up against a parallel of God and God's agenda, which is the opposite of what the corrupt exploiters did.

So what is the central message of this story? **Don't bury your talent.** This is a story about judgment. Each of us have been given a life. We have innate talents. We have differing circumstances. Some of us have more money than others. All of us have potential to do far more than we realize. Jesus came to bring us ABUNDANT life. God does not want us to waste any of it. Do not bury your talent. And we all do. We all hold back from serving God fully and freely. Like the man who had a low opinion of his master, we don't really trust that God has our best interests at heart. We let fear rule us. We take the safe way. We choose the lesser path, the smaller option. We avoid risk. But that is not the kind of freedom God wants us to live into. God wants us to invest our lives fully into serving God, so when we finally stand before the throne of judgment we can hear the words, "Well done, good and faithful servant! Come and share your master's happiness!" Amen.

Jeremiah 17: 9-10

<sup>9</sup> The heart is deceitful above all things  
and beyond cure.

Who can understand it?

<sup>10</sup> "I the Lord search the heart  
and examine the mind,

to reward each person according to their conduct,  
according to what their deeds deserve."

Matthew 25:14-30

<sup>14</sup> "Again, it will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted his wealth to them. <sup>15</sup> To one he gave five bags of gold, to another two bags, and to another one bag, each according to his ability. Then he went on his journey. <sup>16</sup> The man who had received five bags of gold went at once and put his money to work and gained five bags more. <sup>17</sup> So also, the one with two bags of gold gained two more. <sup>18</sup> But the man who had received one bag went off, dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money.

<sup>19</sup> "After a long time the master of those servants returned and settled accounts with them. <sup>20</sup> The man who had received five bags of gold brought the other

five. 'Master,' he said, 'you entrusted me with five bags of gold. See, I have gained five more.'

<sup>21</sup> "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!'

<sup>22</sup> "The man with two bags of gold also came. 'Master,' he said, 'you entrusted me with two bags of gold; see, I have gained two more.'

<sup>23</sup> "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!'

<sup>24</sup> "Then the man who had received one bag of gold 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. <sup>25</sup> So I was afraid and went out and hid your gold in the ground. See, here is what belongs to you.'

<sup>26</sup> "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? <sup>27</sup> 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.'

<sup>28</sup> "So take the bag of gold from him and give it to the one who has ten bags. <sup>29</sup> For whoever has will be given more, and they will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them. <sup>30</sup> And throw that worthless servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'