

“Use It or Lose It”

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Scripture: Matthew 25:14-30

14 “For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them;

15 to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away.

16 The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents.

17 In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents.

18 But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master’s money.

19 After a long time, the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them.

20 Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, ‘Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents.

21 His master said to him, ‘Well done good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.

22 And the one with the two talents also came forward saying, ‘Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents. 23 His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.

24 Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, ‘Master, I knew you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed;

25 so I was afraid and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.

26 But his master replied, ‘You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter?

27 Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest.

28 So take the talent from him and give it to the one with the ten talents.

29 For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away.

30 As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Use It Or Lose It

I will tell you, this parable has mystified me in the past. I have heard many different discussions about it through the years and none of them made sense to me. So, I would just turned the page and looked for something else to read. But, I'm glad I chose this reading for today.

So, this rich fellow is going on a long trip and he decides to parcel out his money to three servants for them to safeguard. The commentaries tell us that the total amount was along the lines of a lifetime of income. It was a lot of money!

I guess we can assume the owner usually took care of his financial affairs himself, but now needed to entrust someone to do it for him in his absence.

In this parable, Christ is the master, the owner of all things, and we are the three servants. This parable is about scarcity and abundance. That is, scarcity and abundance of faith toward investing our lives in God.

So, here's the first key word in today's message: TRUST.

With this much money, I'm sure he had more than just three employees, but he trusted these three.

In the Roman Empire, slaves were not like slaves we think of in our own history. Back then, slaves were allowed to earn wages and bonuses and to own property. I am sure the master of Jesus' story had seen how these three had managed their own affairs and this gave him reason to believe they could handle his money. Jesus' listeners understood the circumstances he was referring to.

I am sure, when the first two made their wise investments, they let it be known whose money it was. Like most rich people, I am sure the master's name was familiar to all the financial folks and his name carried much influence. No one would dare try to cheat or embezzle THIS man's money!

I wonder if the three servants felt awkward about the differing amounts. This past Halloween, I was handing out candy and a group of small children rang the doorbell. I just started grabbing candy out of the bowl and tossing it into the bags. One little fellow seemed very intrigued with how much the others got, then he looked into his own bag – then he looked up at me. I gave him another piece.

The differing amounts of money given to these servants had a purpose and they were supposed to honor that purpose. The child at my door just wanted to eat the candy.

Nevertheless, the bible tells us that the amounts differed according to their abilities. If we step away from the parable for a moment and imagine all of us on a Christian journey, we see that we are each at different points along the way. Maybe that is why the different abilities were part of the story.

So, the trust was not a sense of favoritism, but trust in the most absolute terms. Is there a guarantee when we trust someone? We find many words that can relate to trust; words like confidence, love, and fearless. But not guarantee! When we invest our money, we trust the broker to do his/her best, but no one can offer a guarantee.

God trusts us. And he knows very well that we are going to stumble along the way. He doesn't ask for a guarantee. Just the promise of trying. There's another word for that kind of trust – GRACE. That's the next key word in this message. If you want to feel a small taste of what God is doing here, try to remember the first time you handed the car keys to your teenager and he/she disappeared around the corner of the block. That's trust and grace on your part.

And absolute joy for the teenager! I'm finally an adult! Look at me, I'm all grown up! I'm driving the family car! And hopefully, all the things you have taught will still be in place.

And when that youngster makes it back home a few minutes later with the loaf of bread from Publix and the car is still intact, what happens? The trust grows a tiny bit more; and so does the joy. And grace continues. Our relationship with God also grows when He gives us a task and we give it our best.

Now here's the part that used to confuse me. And this points out the danger of listening to the wrong people. Years ago, I heard someone say that the action taken by the first two servants represented 'WORKS' and had nothing to do with grace. Why was the master so happy with them? They had taken action and gotten results! He was pleased with them because of their works, I was told. No, that's not right...

We know that God's love for us includes forgiveness. So, why wasn't the third servant forgiven? Here again, I have heard all kinds of fundamental explanations about the master's unforgiving treatment of him. The parable used the third servant to represent the scribes and Pharisees. They wanted the law to remain like the money - unchanged. They wanted to build a fence around it. They didn't want to hear about a new covenant or anything new that threatened their status and power. In essence, they placed limits on God. They had him in a box, on a shelf, so convenient. So, let's keep it that way.

The first two servants are going to grow. They took risks with appropriate depth of thought. The scripture tells us that new responsibilities would be theirs. Their journey continued.

The third servant? Well, he really wasn't a bad guy. After all, the money was there, unchanged. Not a penny lost, but not a penny more. So, what's the point? It's not about accumulating wealth or doubling your money. It's about living. It's about taking risks. When is the last time you took a risk in Jesus name? Don't worry, he's not asking you to jump off a cliff. How many risks did he take in your name? It's about being a follower of Jesus. It's about taking a high-risk venture.

So, ironically, the greatest risk is to play it safe. Conventional theology tells us that sin comes from pride and egotism. But, there's another way to look at it. One of the seven deadly sins of the ancient church was SLOTH.

It means not living up to your human potential, not caring, playing it safe, taking no risks, advancing nowhere, burying the money. The best way to avoid wrong choices is to make no choice at all; do nothing. Avoid the high-risk venture. Let the fear of failure dictate your behavior.

The perception of the third slave is the pivotal point of the whole parable. How we think of God is critical to how the kingdom manifests itself in our world.

I'd like to read something to you, written not by someone who is alive today, but certainly more contemporary than the disciple Matthew:

It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better.

The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly... who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly.

Theodore Roosevelt

The parable says the third servant was cast into the darkness. He did not dare greatly. When we bury the money, we make our own darkness. Christ keeps no one to be idle.

Sometimes we use faith to make a personal comfort zone, one with no risks. Is faith just about personal security? Security here and in the hereafter? Is faith just an intellectual exercise? Do we keep our personal theology all in our heads and never get our hands dirty?

There is one interesting feature about this story. At no point did the master tell his servants to go and do something with the money. They just did it, because as faithful servants, they knew what their master would have wanted.

What talents do you have? Look into your hearts and see if you have any personal resource to meet the needs of others or of the church. Are we acting as we know the master would want? Or are we just sitting on our potential? Do we look for excuses before we look for opportunity?

If you decide to look into your hearts in this manner, remember that whatever you may find was not put there by you.

We all know people who are daredevils. They ride roller coasters, jump out of airplanes, dive beneath the ocean, ride bucking bulls and broncos. They say they feel very much alive when they take risks. I'm not telling anyone to take up skydiving, but if you really want to feel God's presence, see his miracles at work, to know that He is right beside you – there are spiritual risks you can take. It's not about just believing ideas about God, it's taking the risk to invest our lives, to be bold, to reach high, and care deeply.

Like the master of the parable, Christ has left, ascended, and left us with a job to do. And he's coming back!

If we dare to act boldly, remember that we're not keeping score. The first two servants loved their master and what they did was done for him. The last part of verses 22 and 23 say, "...*enter into the joy of thy Lord.*" That's what he said to each of the first two servants. Picture your favorite adult when you were growing up. When you did something that pleased him or her, did it not give you a sense of joy that could not carry a monetary value? That's what this is saying.

One last loose end in the understanding of this parable. What's all this about the master being a hard man, reaping where he did not sow? That was the third servant's excuse. But it carries a contradiction. If the master was so bad, why wouldn't the servant try even harder to avoid his wrath?

Maybe it was a matter of perspective. How often do we see God as the grand enforcer of rules, stern and prone to hand out punishment?

Why didn't the first two say something negative about the master? Maybe they saw him as a source of grace.

I once heard this: *Two men looked out from prison bars. One saw the mud, the other saw the stars.*

So, it could be a matter of perspective.

Secondly, it could be just social immaturity in the third servant. His excuse just did not make sense. Picture the teachers you had when you were in school. Think of one who was a hard driver, a real task-master. Someone who stuck to the rules of conduct and insisted on excellence in your homework. Most likely, some of your schoolmates, maybe even you, would find reasons why you didn't like him/her. Most likely, these reasons had nothing to do with the academic demands and everything to do with some exaggerated criticism with just the right twist to make it sound plausible. My high school physics teacher was that way. He had a way of making you really feel stupid, but that's not the excuse we gave for not liking him. He wore mismatched clothes and combed his hair weird, according to us. And he tried to tell jokes that were not funny. Boy! What names we had for him! But, I must say, we learned some physics.

This parable is not about favoritism or teachers you didn't like and certainly not about money. It's about the adventure of faith; the high risk venture of being a disciple of Jesus. It's about coming closer and closer to the image God made us in.

Has God given you a job to do? Are you ready for it? Are you ready to dare greatly?

Amen.