

September 19, 2021 at St. Matthew, Port Washington, WI

Gladly Use the Gifts God Gave You!

So...Is the master good or bad? It seems that the master is harsh. We hear him yelling at his servant and then ordering him to be thrown into darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Yikes! To quickly summarize the gospel lesson: A wealthy man went on a long journey. Before he left, he gave one of his servants/employees 5 bags of gold. (Literally, it's 5 talents. A talent is much more than just a coin. Some scholars say a talent was about 75 pounds worth of gold. That's a LOT of money.) He gave another servant 2 bags of gold and still another servant received one bag of gold.

When he returned from his long journey, he checked in with the three fellows. The first one with 5 bags of gold explained that he invested his 5 bags of gold. Maybe he flipped some houses, or started some restaurants or worked the stock market. He told his master (:20), **"See, I have gained five more [bags of gold]."** He is not bragging. The emphasis is on the amount. It's more like, "Wow! I'm surprised I have 5 more bags!" The second servant said that he invested his 2 bags of gold and was surprised to end up with 2 more bags. The servant who received one bag explained that he was afraid because he knew that his master was a greedy business man. So, he buried his one bag of gold and was able to return to his master exactly what he had given him. The master exploded (:26), **"You wicked, lazy servant!"** and had him thrown into darkness and suffering.

It seems that the master is bad, but let's look more closely. The master gave each of his servants an amazing gift. He entrusted them with a LOT of money. Notice, also, that the master gave them bags of gold (:15), **"each according to his ability."** He did not give them more than they could handle. Also, when the 5 bags guy reported, the master said (:21), **"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 master says the exact same thing to the fellow with two bags of gold. The amount of money did not matter to the master. He was concerned with their attitude and effort. Not only does he commend them, he invites them to share his joy. They were no longer servants, but are going to sit at the master's table as friends and celebrate with him.

Now consider the fellow with one bag of gold. He said that he was afraid of losing the talent and that the master was a harsh man, so he buried his gold on purpose which took just as much effort as investing it. He treated the gift as if it was something he did not want. There was no heart response to his master's kindness. He had the ability to manage that gold, but he refused. He behaved as if he had no gift at all. He was lazy! He tried to excuse his laziness by accusing his master of being too harsh. But if he knew that his master was harsh then he knew what his master wanted him to do with his gold. He had no excuse. The problem was with him, not his master. So ... is the master good or bad? He's good. He gives gifts.

Jesus told this parable and the Holy Spirit preserved it for us so that we could learn from it. The "talent" or "bags of gold" represents everything that God gives us – intellectual and physical abilities, the good news of God's saving love, opportunities to work and interact with others, as well as money and other things. Our Lord wants us to, expects us to, use the gifts he has given us for good things. He wants us to use our time, our abilities, our money, our faith to do the things he has placed before us. As a husband or wife, father or mother, parent or child, employer or employee or retiree – we all have things to do. Certainly, we want to be like the servants who put their gold to work, don't we? We do not want to be the lazy one who gets kicked out. But that one phrase of the master's keeps tripping me up. He said to those two fellows (:21,23), **"Well done, good and faithful servant!"** I can not live up to that description. And neither can you.

I'd like to think that I would have a better chance if the master said, "Well done, you have been a mostly good and a mostly faithful servant." But that doesn't really help, does it? How would we ever know if we've been mostly good? There are so, so many times that I have not done the right thing, times that I have mismanaged my time, times that I have said the wrong thing or did not open my mouth to say the right thing. All of us have things in our past that we wish we could forget, things we should not have done, words we should not have said, thoughts we should not have. Outwardly, our lives might seem better than someone else, but we know that our hearts are infected with sin. Isaiah reminded us (64:4) that even our **"righteous acts are like filthy rags."** Even when I do something that God is pleased, my sinful nature gets involved and ruins it. Let's say that someone wants to acknowledge a special blessing from the Lord so gives a special gift to the Lord (money, flowers on the altar, a

gift to missions, etc.). That's great, but then the sinful nature quickly suggests, "I bet no one else gave a special gift like you did. The church is lucky to have someone like you." And then we're proudly patting ourselves on our backs instead of trusting in Jesus. Then, when we realize that we are not perfect, the devil is so quick to suggest, "You are not a good and faithful servant. You can expect to get thrown into darkness and suffering."

That's why I spent so much time pointing out that the master in Jesus' parable is good. He gives us gifts. He gives us abilities to work and earn money to take care of the bodies and the families God has given us. He gives us time to pray and study his word. He gives us friends and family, co-workers and classmates to encourage us and help us. He gives us an economy and culture and country that – even with all its imperfections – lets us live safely and rest our heads on soft pillows each night. But most importantly, he gives us his Son, Jesus.

A trick question I like to ask Catechism students is, "What did Jesus do for us?" The standard answer is, "He died for us." I tell them that is ½ right, which is 50%, which is failing. Yes, of course, Jesus died for us, but he also lived for us. He was born and grew up like everyone of us. He kept every commandment perfectly. He always kept God first place in his heart and life. He never used God's name in a wrong way or prayed without concentrating. He honored his parents and the government, even though it was rotten. He helped people, encouraged people, loved people, even those who fought against him. He never even had a dirty thought. Jesus was a good and faithful servant of his heavenly Father. He could check off every commandment, "Kept perfectly."

People who play golf dream a getting a hole in one. Even many professionals never get a hole in one. Still, it does happen. But it is impossible for a golfer to get a hole-in-one on all 18 holes, right? Some are par-5s. No one can hit the ball that far. But that's what Jesus did, not in a game of golf, but in life. Everything was perfect. And at the top of his scorecard, he wrote your name. You get credit for the perfect life that Jesus lived. Even though you and I know that we are often bad and unfaithful, because of Jesus, God declares you to be good and faithful. We have FAR MORE than some bags of gold. We have salvation full and free. Jesus carried every sin to Calvary's cross to get it erased from your record. Then he rose again to guarantee you life after death with a glorified body. Won't that be awesome! No more being tired or frustrated or hurting. Perfection is yours! God is a good and loving.

God made you good and faithful servants. Alleluia! Good and faithful servants want to do what their master wants them to do. We want to use the gifts and abilities, time and talents God has given us for good things. Certainly, we all have different gifts, abilities, and opportunities. God intentionally made us different from each other so that we could each have a unique impact on this world and so that God would be uniquely pleased with each one of us. What I mean is: One Christian expresses his faith by doing a good work. The Lord is pleased with that. But you express your faith by doing some else. And the Lord is pleased with that too. He is pleased with you as an individual. The person who cannot read music is not going to be able to play for worship, but he can do other things, like cleaning or mowing or encouraging others or praying more. The person who only has a few hundred dollars to his name cannot give as much as someone with a million dollars in his bank account. Yet, God is pleased with both of their offerings which come from a heart of faith. The person who is an extrovert is able to connect with many people. The person who is an introvert is able to connect more deeply with individuals heart to heart. Both are good. There are thousands of examples. Think of some things that you can do that others can not do. Also, think of some things that others can do that you can not do.

Being a Christian is not just a confession in our hearts. And it's certainly not something we do for an hour on Sunday morning. It is a way of life. We do not go through life worried that God is angry and harsh. We go through life happy that God is good and gracious and giving. And as you grasp how wonderfully the Lord has blessed you, you will gladly use the gifts God gave you. Amen.