

Learning to be a faithful servant. Matthew 25:14-30

Commonly called the *Parable of the Talents*, this passage has been interpreted in many different ways over the years. This usually depends on whether it has been lifted out of its context or not.

Some readers would have it describe how we use spiritual gifts. Others just look at what we seem humanly capable of doing to pass on the message of discipleship, while others see the principles of making a financial fortune.

It is about what heaven is like and therefore about God's nature too.

It comes at the end of a trio of parables that are discussing what a faithful servant is like. The Contemporary English Version (CEV) of the bible calls these three stories *Faithful and unfaithful servants*, *A story about ten girls* and *A story about three servants*.

In Matthew 24:45-51 there are servants who are put in charge of giving the other servants their food supplies at the proper time. *The faithful servants* are the ones who are found doing what their master expects of them when he returns.

But some servants are unfaithful because they think it best to do things in their own way. Mistreating other servants and getting drunk on the master's supplies, they end up being punished as they pretend to serve their master. Sprung because the master returns when he chooses, they also lose their jobs. But more importantly they lose the trust of their master.

Some of the girls in the second story prepare well for the wedding by ensuring they have more than enough oil. Their wisdom pays off when the groom arrives later than expected. The other five girls request some oil for their lamps, but the wise girls say "There's not enough oil for all of us. Go buy your own. You should have been ready!" The foolish girls miss the festivities because by the time they get back, the doors are closed.

A good master knows his servants' capabilities, seeks to grow their skills and trusts them to work honestly to do the tasks he sets them. The master in today's reading from Matthew 25:14-30 is likened to God, as Jesus begins this parable by saying "*Again, here is what the kingdom of heaven is like.*" (vs 14a)

The master needs to leave the servants in charge when he goes on a long journey, so he expects them to be faithful. This is why he gave responsibility for different amounts of his wealth to each servant. Spreading his massive fortune among three servants seems wise to him as he is treating them with respect and giving them the opportunity to display that they can be trusted.

On his return he finds that two servants have increased the value of what they were in control by 100%. The first had been given five talents and made five more. The second had received two talents and made two more. Both had taken appropriate risks as they expected their master would.

The third servant received just one talent, a block of precious metal, silver or gold, which was the equivalent of 15 years' wages for a farm labourer.

Yet the third servant didn't follow his master's criteria and took no risks. He hid the one talent that was in his charge because he was afraid to take any risk. He feared the master's response should he lose any of the funds.

Obviously not impressed with this servant's demonstrated lack of faith, the master punishes the servant harshly. The third servant had the ability, but not the gumption to make a profit or put the resources to good use. This servant is treated like the unfaithful servant in the first story. The master says:

"You are lazy and good for nothing. You know I harvest what I don't plant and gather crops where I haven't scattered seed. You could have at least put my money in the bank to earn interest". Matt 25:26-27.

The master explained his disillusionment well to the third servant and to add insult to injury gave the talent to the first servant as this servant was shrewd and understood what the expectations of the master were. We learn not only about the talents we possess but rather the way we face being a servant.

The principle here is explained further:

"Everyone who has something will be given more and they will have more than enough. But everything will be taken from those who haven't got anything." (Matt.25:29)

While it sounds a bit like the phrase "the rich get richer and the poor get poorer", it helps to recall that the context is Jesus telling a parable to illustrate what the kingdom of heaven is like.

In merely a worldly context, it appears that the servant may well have been justified in fearing his master. But fear informs his decision to play it safe.

We may feel that God is unjust. But it's the servant who is entirely wrong. He thinks he knows his master but the truth is that his small-mindedness betrays what he could have done. The servant had a responsibility to show trust and have faith in his master. God doesn't value playing it safe.

Remember God is in charge in heaven. Jesus is talking about a loving, caring and understanding God when he tells this parable.

If we have faith that God is fair and faithful then we can reach out and trust.

Indeed, those of God's adopted family are likely to use their riches for the benefit of all in God's Kingdom. The reason they have these riches is to fulfil God's purpose. They share the master's joy as in (vs23c) "Come and share your master's happiness."

What risks are we taking as a church? We have missed our regular church attendance. But we have kept the faith by ensuring that in these days of dwindling offerings and lack of a regular younger generation below 40 years, we are doing many things to keep knowing Christ and making him known.

We are committed to our pre-school programs Mainly Music & Playgroup. Like other Uniting Churches across Gippsland we have contributed to September Camp both financially and in leadership. Despite these activities being in recess, we maintain our connections and we keep faith that we will meet again.

Our banner group continues to enrich our thinking and delight in the Lord.

Our gardeners are refreshing our church's physical appearance. That those walking by can see us at work indicates the transformational journey we are on.

Our church council are doing what they can to gather us safely together.

Our Interim Intentional ministry explores our future. An action plan is being developed with 20 % of the 40 spiritually mature people we chose freely giving their time, energy, thoughts and prayers.

We continue Bible study online and read our daily readings. We ensure that there is regular contact by distributing our Talking Point and that worship continues at home. We interact with others around us as God calls us to share his name and his desire to bring other people into his kingdom by our faith in action among those we meet.

And why do we do it? We are God's sheep. We have been blessed through Jesus Christ. We belong together and we long for our master's affirmation:

"Well done good and faithful servant". (vs 21a)

God blesses us richly so we need to show trust and have faith in our generous God to serve him well. Not to take a risk like the third servant is to deny our dependency and our relationship with God.

(Matt. 25:40 The king will answer, "Whenever you did it for any of my people, no matter how unimportant they seemed, you did it for me.")

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Ref. <https://asermonforeverysunday.com/sermons/a52-twenty-fourth-sunday-pentecost-year/> Rev Dr Judy Kincaid Pastor of Immanuel Lutheran Church in Escanaba, Michigan,

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