

1 Thessalonians 5: 1-11, Matthew 25: 14-30  
Olivet Church, Charlottesville --- November 19, 2017

### *We Belong to the Day*

We are tempted to treat Jesus' parables as allegories, with the characters and events in the stories representing God, historical figures, and events. But the harshness of the master in today's parable discourages us from making a correlation between him and God or Jesus, and reminds us that these stories are not allegories.

And there are those who use Jesus' teachings about the end-time, when he returns to judge the world and usher in the fullness of God's kingdom, to instill fear in people that they might return to God and God's way. But the fact that the servant who was judged harshly, and thrown into outer darkness, had acted out of fear should discourage us from using the threat of judgement to instill faith and discipleship.

The Parable of the Talents is part of Jesus' discourse with his disciples about enduring through difficult times while living in anticipation of his return. It recalls the parable of the faithful and wise slave in chapter 24, who, although the master is delayed, continues to do the work of the master until the master returns to find him doing the tasks that have been appointed to him in the master's absence.

A remarkable element of the Parable of the Talents is the amount of wealth that is entrusted to each servant. A talent, a certain weight of precious metal, was equal to about 6,000 denarii. Since one denarius was a common laborer's daily wage, a talent would be roughly equivalent to 20 years of wages. Five talents, the largest amount entrusted to the servants, is comparable to one hundred years' worth of labor; an astronomical amount of money.

The other remarkable element of this parable is the intention of the master in entrusting his property to his servants: that it is not merely be merely preserved, but enlarged. After a long absence, he discovers what each servant has done with his property. The first two slaves do business with the master's talents and double his money. They have each performed according to their potential, and they have been faithful in doing what the master desired, the multiplication of his property. The master commends them for being good and faithful, entrusts them with more responsibility, and invites them to enter his "joy."

The third servant is not so fortunate. In the response of this slave we learn about the master's investment goals. He is a man "who reaps where he does not sow and gathers where he has not scattered seed." He aggressively seeks to expand his estate. The third slave admits that he was afraid to lose the master's money. To protect himself, he buried the talent in the ground. Although this may seem odd to us, burying treasure has been quite common through history when banks and financial institutions were not so trustworthy, regulated, or insured. My mother recalls that while a teenager an uncle passed on and her father had gone out to the uncle's house with a metal detector to locate and dig up all of the mason jars filled with silver dollar coins that he had buried around his yard.

I suspect that in Jesus' day the financial investment strategy of most property owners would have been a conservative, security-based one; and his disciples would have found the master's risky investment goals surprising. We may overlook this feature of the story. We are accustomed to seeking a maximum return on accrued wealth. You'd be pleased to know that even with our relatively small investment accounts for local outreach and building maintenance at Olivet, Jack Kirk shows up at the monthly meeting of the Church Support Committee not only with a report on the fund balances, but a comparison of the performance of the Presbyterian Foundation relative to various stock market index funds to make sure our funds are growing at an optimal rate.

When Matthew wrote his gospel, 40 years into the life of the early church, Jesus' followers were experiencing resistance, even persecution, from the Jewish community and the Roman authorities. And so they would have been tempted to hide their lamp under a bushel in fear, even though in Christ they had become the light of the world. And yet they were also witnessing the explosive growth of the community of faith, the extension and expansion of God's kingdom, as people respond to the good news of God's love, salvation, and promises in Christ, and so they would have been emboldened to shine their light before others.

Jesus' parable would have resonated with them in the midst of their fear and excitement, reminding them of the value of what they had been entrusted with. Lowly peasants, fishermen, and country bumpkins at the bottom of the social order, they had in Christ been elevated to landed aristocracy as children of the Lord of Heaven and Earth, inheritors of a life and future of incomparable glory, recipients of immeasurable wealth. And his parable would have reminded them of what they were witnessing as the gift entrusted to them was being multiplied before their very eyes.

Jesus tells this story to his disciples to prepare them for the days ahead when awaiting his return their faith would be tested, and his gifts and kingdom would be increasing. They are, to move to the language of Paul, to live out of their new identity as children of the light and of the day, as new creations in Christ, citizens of his everlasting kingdom, bearing fruit, multiplying God's gift, extending the kingdom.

Paul's argument is based upon a fundamental premise: Christians have undergone a dramatic transformation. Salvation is not a trivial matter. Those who are saved by faith in Christ are not merely improved, but rather radically transformed. They have been delivered from death and given eternal life. They have been delivered from slavery to sin and evil to become children of the living God.

By faith we are born anew, we become new creations in Christ, we are in the world but not of the world. Our ultimate allegiance and true identity is in the kingdom of God. This is what Paul is speaking of when he reminds the Thessalonian Christians that they are not people of the night or darkness, but of light and of the day. With two realms present, there is no neutral ground, you are participating in and supporting one or the other: either God's kingdom of love, light, and life; or the sinful, fallen, worldly kingdom of darkness, selfishness, and death.

Some time back the Friday Book Group read a book that spoke about the nature of God's final judgment, and the metaphor of weeping and gnashing of teeth, as being the experience of becoming fully aware of the pain and suffering inflicted on others, often unknowingly, by our self-serving, sinful wills, ways, and words.

But today's parable invites us to reflect on the experience of weeping and gnashing of teeth that will come when we are confronted not merely with our sins of "commission" as we call them, but our sins of "omission," what we have failed to do for others, for the world, with the gift that God has entrusted to us.

Sarah and Angelina Grimke grew up in the mid-1800s on a plantation in South Carolina where their family owned hundreds of slaves, and their father, who became chief justice of the supreme court of the state, did not support their education as women. And yet they became two of the earliest antislavery activists and leaders of the movement for women's rights in America. The great change in Angelina's life came when she heard this parable read in church and went home and sat in her chair thinking to herself, "What have you done with the talent committed to your care?" That question led to a dramatic change in her life, a change that helped change a nation, and extend the Kingdom of God on earth. With two realms present, God's kingdom of love, light, and life; and the sinful, fallen, worldly kingdom of darkness, slavery, and death the Grimke sisters multiplied the gift and Kingdom of Christ they had received.

One hundred years later the effect of the Civil Rights movement was to again make two alternative societies and worlds visible, such that people realized they needed to actively choose to live in a manner that did not support a society of racial hatred, discrimination, and injustice.

I suspect that the revelations of sexual harassment and assault by leading men in industry, government, and entertainment today is having a similar effect of making two alternative, competing social orders visible such that people will have to intentionally choose to live in a way that affirms and furthers that culture that honors, respects, protects, affirms, and lifts up women.

Our day, our time, is not so unlike that of 40 years after Christ's death and resurrection when Matthew wrote down this story Jesus told. We are reminded of the nature of our living as his followers in the world as we await his return in glory. Particularly, what we do and how we live is not done out of fear, but joy. It is not about building up a resume of good deeds, or improving our character sufficiently to hear God say to us, "well done thou good and faithful servant." God has already loved, saved, and blessed us in Christ. God has already given us the gift that five or five thousand talents can only hint at. And what we do in the present is not simply trying to make the present life a little more bearable, until the day when we leave this body and world behind. God made this world, and made you and me in love. And God so loved this world that he sent his Son. And God will restore this world completely at the end of time when Christ returns.

What we do, how we live in the present in our families, workplaces, communities, and world lasts into God's future because that future came among us in Christ, and is being expanded among us by the guidance and power of the Holy Spirit. The love and care of neighbors, the creation of beauty, the furthering of justice, the building of community and harmony, the work to

preserve species and clean up rivers, are part of what is eternal, what has been planted among us and will come one day in all its fullness: the beauty, the justice, the peace, the joy, the restored creation and reclaimed humanity of the kingdom of God.