

The Joy of Your Master

A sermon preached by Dr. John Clayton at Covenant Presbyterian Church of Fort Smith, Arkansas on January 17, 2021.

For it will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted to them his property. To one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. He who had received the five talents went at once and traded with them, and he made five talents more. So also he who had the two talents made two talents more. But he who had received the one talent went and dug in the ground and hid his master's money. Now after a long time the master of those servants came and settled accounts with them. And he who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five talents more, saying, 'Master, you delivered to me five talents; here, I have made five talents more.' His master said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master.' And he also who had the two talents came forward, saying, 'Master, you delivered to me two talents; here, I have made two talents more.' His master said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master.' He also who had received the one talent came forward, saying, 'Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you scattered no seed, so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here, you have what is yours.' But his master answered him, 'You wicked and slothful servant! You knew that I reap where I have not sown and gather where I scattered no seed? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and at my coming I should have received what was my own with interest. So take the talent from him and give it to him who has the ten talents. For to everyone who has will more be given, and he will have an abundance. But from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. And cast the worthless servant into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth' (Matthew 25:14-30).¹

Are all of those in the visible church true believers in Christ? Or is it possible to be in the church but apart from Christ? Does the title "Christian" convey redemptive qualities? Or is it possible to claim to be a true believer and yet not truly believe? Is it possible for God to bestow the blessings of his outward and ordinary means of grace upon the church and some receive them and rightly use them while others disregard them and ignore them?

In short, there are unbelievers intermixed with believers within the visible church. This is nothing new. The Apostle John describes those in the church but who "were not of us" (1 John 4:19). Likewise, Hebrews describes "those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then have fallen away" (Heb. 6:4-6). Rather than bearing fruit, they produce "thorns and thistles" (Heb. 6:8). As Jesus put it in his Parable of the Sower, "they have no root," and so they fall away (Mark 4:17). We see this also in the Parable of the Talents, in which one of the three servants entrusted with their master's wealth produces nothing with it and is cast into "outer darkness."

¹ Unless referenced otherwise, all Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2001).

Often misunderstood because of the word translated “talents”, the parable has nothing to do with innate human gifts or abilities, or talent. Rather, as translated here a talent is the equivalent of a monetary unit. Scholars estimate that one talent was equal to twenty years of wages for the average worker, half a lifetime of money earned. The sums of five, two, and one talent then are considerable sums of wealth. But it is not the valuation that is the focus of the parable but the stewardship. Each of the servants are entrusted by their master with the privilege of responsibility.

The Privilege of Responsibility

Each of the three servants are entrusted with different amounts: The first received five, the second received two, and the third received one. Perhaps revealing the prescience of their master, the first two servants double their money, a significant return on investment for their master. But the third servant does nothing, not even gaining the paltry yield of a bank deposit.

Based on the words of the third servant, it is likely that for all of the servants their actions reveal how they perceive their master and stewardship. The first two apparently understand the privilege they have been given the wealth entrusted to them. And with great privilege comes great responsibility. The yield returned to their master reveals their understanding of their responsibility. In contrast, the third servant sees it as no privilege at all but rather a burden bestowed by a harsh man.

Now consider the privilege of responsibility we have in the visible church. Although a talent is analogous to any gracious provision entrusted to us, consider for example that we have been entrusted with the great wealth of God’s outward and ordinary means of grace, which we believe “are made effectual to the elect for salvation.”² We have been given the privilege of stewarding God’s special, written revelation: The Word of God. Through the reading and especially the preaching of the Word, the Holy Spirit convinces, converts, and builds us up in holiness and peace.³ But with great privilege comes great responsibility. We cannot bury the Word for safekeeping; it bears no yield unopened. We must attend to it with diligence, preparation, and prayer, receiving it as the treasure it is with faith and love, and investing it by laying it up in our hearts and living it out in our lives.⁴

Likewise, it is the church who is entrusted with the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper. It is a privilege to receive the washing with water in the Triune name of our God, signifying and sealing our ingrafting into Christ, and our engagement to be the Lord’s.⁵ It is a privilege to receive by faith the bread and wine according to Christ’s appointment, in which we are

² Q. 88. “The Shorter Catechism,” in *The Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms* (Lawrenceville, GA: Presbyterian Church in America, 2007), 396.

³ Q. 89. Ibid.

⁴ Q. 90. Ibid.

⁵ Q. 94. Ibid., 398.

spiritually nourished and grow in grace.⁶ But with great privilege comes great responsibility. We must look back to the significance of the sign and seal of our baptism, living by faith in holiness and righteousness, and testifying to the reality that we are in Christ.⁷ We must by faith come to the Lord's table regularly, receiving and applying Christ crucified and all the benefits of his death.⁸

And let us not forget the high privilege we have in prayer, not to an unknown god or merely a higher power but to our heavenly Father. It is to him we offer up our desires, "for things agreeable to his will, in the name of Christ, with confession of our sins, and thankful acknowledgement of his mercies."⁹ Consider the privilege that he hears our prayers not merely because he created us but because he redeemed us through his Son's life, death, and resurrection. But with great privilege comes great responsibility. How often have we buried the treasure of prayer for the sake of convenience or indifference? How many times have we prayed to "Our Father who art in heaven" without a consideration of the majesty of God or without a deep sense of our own unworthiness, necessities, and sins? How often have we prayed in the name of Jesus without penitent, thankful, or grateful hearts, or without understanding, faith, sincerity, fervency, love, and perseverance? How often have we forgotten the wealth of prayer entrusted to us by not prayerfully waiting upon the Lord with humble submission to his will?¹⁰

In Christ's church, we have been given the privilege of responsibility, such as God's outward and ordinary means of grace. But not everyone in the visible church considers the means of grace a privilege nor heeds the responsibility. Rather, they receive them with the sloth of indifference.

The Sloth of Indifference

Consider the third servant. He too is entrusted with his master's wealth, but rather than put it to right use for his master's sake, he buries it in the ground. While we might consider this simply a preservation of capital strategy, his words reveal his heart. He says to his master, "I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you scattered no seed, so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here, you have what is yours." These words actually tell us a lot about this "wicked and slothful servant."

First, notice how he characterizes his master. The master *is* how the servant *perceives* him to be: He is a "hard man." This is despite the master's entrustment of significant wealth. In reality, he

⁶ Q. 96. *Ibid.*, 400.

⁷ Q. 167. "The Larger Catechism," in *The Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms* (Lawrenceville, GA: Presbyterian Church in America, 2007), 319-20.

⁸ Q. 170. *Ibid.*, 322-23.

⁹ Q. 98. "The Shorter Catechism," in *The Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms* (Lawrenceville, GA: Presbyterian Church in America, 2007), 400-01.

¹⁰ Q. 185. "The Larger Catechism," in *The Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms* (Lawrenceville, GA: Presbyterian Church in America, 2007), 337-38.

appears to benefit from gracious stewardship, but instead of privileged responsibility the servant sees only harsh servitude.

Second, notice that the servant reveals his knowledge of the reaping and gathering that the master has received from other entrustments. This is not the first time the master has entrusted talents with his servants. It is not the first time he has benefited from it. But the servant cares little for what the master expects or deserves. What he has seen does not inspire him; it scares him.

So, thirdly, with evidence to the contrary, notice that the fearful servant does nothing. He is indifferent to the master's expectations, and he is fearful of responsibility. He cannot see what the master does as gracious endowment but as authoritarian arrogance.

Perhaps you know this servant...in the church. He or she may characterize God not by his gracious provision and blessings but as a God of demands but not grace, a God of expectations but not love. They may look at God's means of grace not as blessings but as burdens. In God they see not a gracious Lord to be loved and served but a task master to be dreaded and avoided.

In the parable, we do not look to the third servant for our example, nor should we look to those of slothful indifference in the church. The two faithful servants willingly serve their master, producing returns in keeping with his gracious entrustment. And in return, the faithful servants are rewarded for their faithfulness.

The Reward of Faithfulness

The master commends the first servant for what he has produced, saying, "Well done, good and faithful servant." But his reward is not only verbal commendation but the privilege of greater responsibility. The master says, "You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much." The reward is precisely what the wicked and slothful servant feared. But for the faithful, God's gracious entrustment is joyful delight. And so the master directs him, "Enter into the joy of your master."

Likewise, the second servant is commended by his master. Notice that the master repeats precisely the same commendation: "Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master." The commendation is the same, as is the reward, because the emphasis is not on how much the master entrusts but on the faithful stewardship of the servant.

Similarly, in the church God entrusts his means of grace according to his purpose and pleasure. Indeed, some are chosen to preach the Word and administer the sacraments, while others are chosen to receive. I am reminded often of James' warning: "Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness" (James 3:1). Such is the privilege of responsibility of the minister of the gospel, but the commendation I long to hear and the reward I desire to receive is no less than those who faithfully serve with me in the church. By God's grace through faith in Christ, we all serve the

Lord and are entrusted with the great wealth of his means of grace. Minister and member alike will enter into the joy of our master.

Interestingly, it is possible that this expression (“the joy of your master”) is a play on words. The Aramaic word translated into Greek as “joy,” can also mean “feast” or “wedding feast.” In this text “joy” could mean to enjoy a banquet with the master.¹¹ In light of the preceding parable and the wedding feast that the wise bridesmaids enjoyed (Matt. 25:1-13), we see not only the pleasure of pleasing but also the future banquet we long to attend. Indeed, all who are in Christ will enter into the Marriage Feast of the Lamb, undoubtedly the joy of our Master. But there will be no banquet for the unfaithful, only the judgment of unfaithfulness.

The Judgment of Unfaithfulness

The third servant, who returned to the master what he was given, is stripped of his privilege. Contrary to our idea of fairness, what he has is given to the servant who has been entrusted with the most. But not only is his stewardship revoked, he is considered “worthless” and “cast...into the outer darkness.”

Of course, it is in the judgment of this servant that we see Jesus’ parable has to do with far more than worldly stewardship. The economy of the kingdom of God is strikingly different than the kingdom of this world, and what the Lord entrusts has eternal consequences. The “outer darkness” characterized by “weeping and gnashing of teeth” is one of Jesus’ idioms for hell. The unfaithful servant not only loses the entrusted talent he is eternally damned.

Sadly, there really are unfaithful servants in the visible church. They hear the Word preached but do not believe. The Lord’s Supper is purely ceremonial and baptism is without significance. Prayer is liturgical lists rather than praise and petition. Having been entrusted with the gracious provisions of Christ’s church, they remain faithless and therefore eternally unfaithful.

Let not these things be said of you. As you have heard the Word preached today, let not this means of grace be wasted on you. Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ as your Savior. Even to the faithless, he remains faithful (1 Tim. 2:13). Trust in him that you too may enter into the joy of your master.

For, it is by God’s grace through faith in Christ the faithful will be rendered. It is by God’s grace through faith the faithful will be rewarded. So, let us rejoice, for it is only by God’s grace through faith in Christ that as faithful servants we will enter into the joy of our Master.

¹¹ Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary On the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1999), 600.