

# "The Final Accounting"

Matthew 25:14-30

November 13, 2011

22<sup>nd</sup> Sunday After Pentecost

As we get deeper into November, we approach, once again, the end of another church year. The themes in our Bible readings direct our attention to the end of the world. Two questions come up with regard to the end of the world. What will happen when the end comes? And what do we do *until* the end comes? Jesus tells a parable to teach us the answer to the latter question. How are we to live in the end times?

The story is about a man who is going on a journey. He is apparently a wealthy man because he owns servants for whom he paid good money. When it is time for the man to leave, he honors his servants with a great trust. He turns over all his wealth to them. He distributes the wealth differently to different servants. One servant received a sizeable amount of money: five talents which was equal to about 15-20 years of wages for a laborer back then. Another servant received two talents. Another receives one talent. Then the man leaves.

This money does not now belong to the servants. It still belongs to the master. The servant's job is one of being stewards. A steward is one who cares for another's property and manages it in accordance with the owner's wishes until he is called to account for it. In this story, the servant who had five talents used them to produce five more talents. The servant who had two talents used them to produce two more talents. However, the servant who had one talent did not use what was given to him. He took his talent and buried it in a hole in the ground.

When the master returns, there is a final accounting of the servants' stewardship. The servant with five talents joyfully gives an account of his stewardship which produced five more talents. The servant with two talents also joyfully gives an account of his stewardship which produced two more talents. Although their results are not equal, they are equally praised by the master, rewarded by the master, and invited by the master to share in his joy.

The third servant is different. He has done nothing with his talent to serve the master. When called to account for it, he blames the master and returns the talent to him. The master condemns him, not for failure to produce results, but for being wicked and lazy. Instead of being rewarded, all that he has is taken from him. Instead of being invited to share in the master's joy, this worthless servant is cast out into the outer darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

What is Jesus saying to us? The master in the story represents our Lord Jesus Christ. He is truly wealthy. All things belong to Him because He made them. All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Him. All grace and mercy have been earned by Him. He has everything.

We, in the Christian church, are the servants. We belong to our Lord Jesus Christ. He not only made us, but He paid the price to redeem us from sin, from death, and from the power of the devil. The cost was high – His blood shed on the cross to cover our sin and His life offered on the cross to give us new life. His resurrection from the dead is the receipt – the proof of purchase – for the Father to show that the payment was accepted. We now serve Him, not to some way earn our way into His household, but out of gratitude because we are already beloved members of that household.

At His ascension, our Lord Jesus Christ embarked on a long journey. But, before leaving, He has entrusted to us and all Christians His wealth. He has given us everything we have – all of our wealth, all of our possessions, all of our skills and talents, and all of our time. Like in the story, our Lord has not given us these things to be owners, but has entrusted these things to be stewards. He expects us to manage His wealth in accordance with His wishes until He comes again.

Although we are equal in salvation, we are not equal in stewardship. Our Lord gives some to all, but not all the same. Some of us have more money than others. Some have more possessions. Some have greater skills. Some have lesser skills. Some have lots of free time. Some have less time. But none of these things, regardless of the amount, belongs to any of us. All have been put

under our individual care and supervision according to our individual abilities to use in serving the Lord.

How does our Lord want us to use His things? Basically, we serve our Lord by serving our neighbor. We care for the physical needs (although not necessarily all the desires) of our families. We provide for the preaching and teaching of the Word of God and the giving of the Sacraments by establishing a congregation, paying its bills, supporting a preacher, and so on so that the spiritual needs of our family in Christ are met. We reach out to serve others in need in our extended families, our friends, and the members of our community. We provide for physical needs through charity and spiritual needs through missions.

As we do this, we will do this in different ways and with different results. Some will have more money to use. Some will have more skills to use. Some will have more time to use. Some will have greater outward success in what they do for the Lord. Some will have less visible success in what they do for the Lord. But let this be only an explanation of what we do and see and not an excuse.

Some will be like the third servant in the story who will simply hide what they have received from the Lord and not put it into service for Him. Don't ever say, "Because I don't have as much money as he does, I don't have to give," or "Because I don't have as much skill as she does, I have nothing to do." Do not hide or deny what the Lord has given you. Do not compare yourself with others. Everyone will have something to manage for the Lord in service to Him with varying results.

As in the story, there will be a final accounting of our stewardship when our Lord Jesus Christ comes again. But it won't be an accounting like we are used to. We are such "bottom line" people. We think that those who produce the most will get the praise; those who produce less will be warned; and anyone who is able to keep safe what he was entrusted will be all right.

That's not the case. Our Lord Jesus views things differently. He will commend and reward, not on the basis of statistically measurable worldly success, but those who have been faithful in managing His wealth in accordance with His wishes, regardless of the numbers. On the other hand,

those who have not used what the Lord has given them to serve Him will be condemned, even if they haven't wasted it, and cast into outer darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Is Jesus saying that people will be cast into hell because they didn't give, do, or serve? Not at all. We are saved by God's grace through faith, not good works. However, as James says, faith without works is dead. A faith that does not produce good works in the area of stewardship is in danger of being a dead faith. It is that lack of faith which will result in the casting out into outer darkness, not lack of success.

So, as we consider the topic of stewardship today and how it affects many things – our use of our blessings in our homes and communities, our financial commitments to our church family for next year, and even our church budget and other items in our afternoon's voters meeting, what are we to do?

First of all, remember that you don't have to earn God's blessing and favor by what you do, what you give, or how you serve. I think many people end up being stewards motivated by guilt more than anything else. You don't have to pay an admission price to get in God's family or keep your place in the family by hard work. Jesus has paid the price in full through His shed blood and sacrificed life on the cross. You don't have to serve out of guilt in order to maintain your place in God's family. God keeps you in His family by His means of grace which continually forgive your sins and keep you in good standing with God.

Second of all, you don't have to play with percentages about what is yours to keep and what is God's share to give. You don't have to divide up what is sacred and what is secular. *Everything* that you have is God's, not yours. This is a freeing experience when you realize it. Again, you don't have to live by guilt which accuses you that some is God's and some is yours and you're never quite sure which is which. Every dollar, every minute, and every skill belongs to God and is freely placed under your stewardship.

Thirdly, serve with a daring and free spirit. The third servant in the parable held on tightly to what he had been given because he was afraid and so he did nothing. In fact, by burying it, he could do nothing. It reminds me of the story about the boy who had his hand in a cookie jar and was crying. When he held on tightly to a cookie, he could not get his closed fist out and he cried. However, when he let go of his grip on the cookie, he was able to pull his hand out and cookies flowed freely out of the jar.

Don't hold on to the stuff God has entrusted to your care. The harder you hold on, the more miserable you will be like the boy with his hand in the cookie jar. Let go and let God's blessing flow freely to you and through you in service to your family, your church, your community, and the world. "Playing with the house's money" is an expression in gambling which means that, once you have won enough money from the house, you can continue to play freely without worry or fear because you don't have to touch your own money again. As stewards of God, we are always "playing with the house's money" since none of it is ours in the first place. It is all God's. Therefore, we freely use everything we have to serve God by serving our neighbor without fear. He has supplied everything to us. When we use everything to serve according to His will, He will replace it according to His will. We are truly free to spend, to serve, to devote our time to His glory without fear for ourselves and our welfare.

Fourthly, never worry about the results of your stewardship. Be wise stewards and not foolish. But don't be competitive with others. Our Lord does not judge by how much we give, how much we serve, or by how much time we devote, but simply by how faithful we are in managing what He has put under our care. The more we are guided by His Word, comforted by His absolution (that is, forgiveness) and strengthened by His Sacraments, the more faithful we will be in our stewardship lives.

The return of our Lord Jesus Christ might surprise some people who are not expecting it or scare some people who are living in the darkness of sin as our epistle reading for today warns us.

Don't let it surprise you or scare you. Be awake and attentive. Live in God's grace and by faith. And use whatever God has placed under your care in His service. And when our Lord returns, may you hear Him say to you, "Well done, good and faithful servant....Enter into the joy of your master."

Amen.