Matthew 25:14–30 and 1 Thessalonians 5:1–11

THE SERVANT I UNDERSTOOD

When I first heard the parable of the talents as a boy, I understood the fellow who buried the money. **[Slide 1]** The money belonged to somebody else. He knew the man would come back for it. And when the man did come back, every bit of it was still there. Part of me wanted to raise my hand and say, "Well, what did you expect him to do? He kept it safe."

I still understand that impulse. If somebody hands you something valuable and you think the first thing they'll do when they get back is look for what you did wrong, you start thinking about how to protect yourself. Returning the money exactly as you received it can sound like the smartest move you could make.

Last Sunday we stood with the bridesmaids waiting for the bridegroom. Today Jesus takes us into another household where someone takes a long time to return. This time I want us to listen for what one man does while he waits, and what he says when the waiting is over.

WHAT FEAR DID WITH THE GIFT

The passage we are looking at is Matthew 25:14–30. If you haven't read it yet, mark it to read this week. **[Slide 2]**

In this parable, the master entrusts his property to his servants. One servant receives five talents, another two, and another one. A talent here is a large sum of money—about twenty years of a day laborer's wages. The third servant has been entrusted with something substantial. Some received more, but everyone received something of great value. Imagine being handed that much and watching the person who gave it to you go down the road. This parable carries forward the question raised by the bridesmaids: what does readiness look like while we wait?[1]

When the master returns, the first two servants bring what they have made with what they were given. One brings five more and one brings two more. Listen to how the master receives them. **[Slide 3]** Each hears the same words, "*Well done, good and faithful servant*!" (Matthew 25:21, 23, NIV). Each is invited to share his master's happiness. Jesus lets us hear that welcome twice before the third servant speaks.

The third servant tells the master how he saw him. He expected a hard man who took what he hadn't worked for. And then he gives the reason he dug the hole. **[Slide 4]** "*So I was afraid and went out and hid your gold in the ground*" (Matthew 25:25, NIV).

The master takes the servant's own reasoning seriously. If that was what the servant truly expected, he could at least have deposited the money with the bankers. But unlike the first two servants, he did nothing with what his master had entrusted to him. His own explanation reveals how little he trusted his master. The parable ends with severe judgment. Jesus wants us to feel the weight of being entrusted with something and doing something with it...

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1 The Holy Bible, New International Version (2011), footnote to Matthew 25:15, https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew+25%3A14-30&version=NIV.

I think that is the part I missed as a boy. I was looking at how I could mess up or lose it. What the servant did shaped everything he did with what the master put in his hands.

I wonder how often we make the same move—and what we miss when we do. We mean to have the conversation. We think about praying with somebody. We feel a nudge to offer what we know how to do. Then we start rehearsing how it might go wrong. Before long, we've talked ourselves into keeping things exactly as they are.

If that sounds familiar, here is a question worth sitting with: **What does my hesitation reveal about the God I expect to meet?** **[Slide 5]**

That question asks something of each of us personally. Spurgeon put it this way: "Remember, my hearer, that in the day of judgment thy account must be personal; God will not ask you what your church did — he will ask you what you did yourself."[2]

Let's take that a little further. Sometimes we talk about being ready for Jesus' return as though it were something so spiritual that we cannot quite say what it looks like. But Jesus brings it into everyday life. What are we doing with what the Lord has placed in our hands? **[Slide 6]** Our knowledge? Our time? Our money? Our abilities?

We tend to notice the sins of commission, *what we do*. **[Slide 7]** But this parable asks us to take the sins of omission, *what we don't do*, just as seriously. The servant explained that he had kept the money safe. Yet everything his master had entrusted to him he left buried.

THE GOD WE WILL MEET

And when he explained why, he spoke of fear. **[Slide 8]** We need to linger there a moment, because some of us know how fear can shape what we are willing to bring into a relationship—even our relationship with God.

Some of us learned to read the room early. We could tell from the way a door closed or the sound of footsteps whether this was a good time to ask a question. And we may have carried that habit into prayer. We catch ourselves trying to get the words just right because we are afraid of what will happen if we bring God the truth about ourselves.

Our histories can help us understand that hesitation. But as we come to know Christ, we begin to learn what we can expect when we bring ourselves to him.

That is where the Apostle Paul helps us. The Thessalonians were waiting for the Lord, too. He tells them that the day will come unexpectedly. He calls them to stay awake and sober, wearing faith and love like a breastplate and the hope of salvation like a helmet. Then he tells them where that hope comes from. **[Slide 9]**

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2 Charles H. Spurgeon, "The Two Talents," sermon no. 175, preached January 31, 1858, at the Music Hall, Royal Surrey Gardens, in Spurgeon's Sermons, vol. 4 (1858), Christian Classics Ethereal Library, https://www.ccel.org/ccel/spurgeon/sermons04.xi.html.

[Read 1 Thessalonians 5:1–11.]

God has appointed us to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Thessalonians 5:9). Jesus died for us so that we may live together with him (1 Thessalonians 5:10). Friends, there is the gospel. **[Slide 10]** The Lord we are waiting to meet is the Lord who has already given himself for us. He knows the ground we have dug up to hide things from him. He knows what fear has done to us and what we have done out of fear. When he calls us to account, we are dealing with the same Jesus who went to the cross for us.

That puts my childhood question in a different light. I asked what the master could expect from somebody who was afraid. Now I find myself asking what becomes possible when Christ teaches a frightened person to trust him. **[Slide 11]** We can tell the truth about where we've been hiding. We can ask forgiveness. We can take responsibility for the next act of obedience, even if our hands still shake a little when we offer it.

Our Friends tradition has language for this. We believe that Jesus Christ is present and teaches his people. You see, God's presence changes our understanding of faithfulness and opens our eyes to ways God can work through us.[3]

Faithful While We Wait

I love where the Apostle Paul takes this passage. After talking about the day of the Lord and about Jesus giving himself for us, he tells the church, "*Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing*" (1 Thessalonians 5:11, NIV). **[Slide 12]**

He knows there are already people doing this in Thessalonica. Somebody is paying attention to the person who is worn out. Somebody is saying a word that helps a brother or sister hold on to hope. And the Apostle Paul wants them to keep doing it. This is part of how a church stays awake while it waits for Christ.

This is how holiness takes shape among us. **[Slide 13]** Christ gives us himself, and by his Spirit he forms us into people who can give ourselves in love. A person who used to withdraw when things got hard learns to stay present. A person who has been afraid of saying the wrong thing learns to ask a simple, honest question and listen to the answer. The work God does within us reaches someone else.

Think of someone whose name has been on your mind lately. **[Slide 14]** This week, you might call and say, "You've been on my mind. How are you doing?" Then give them time to answer.

And some of us will be on the other end of that call. **[Slide 15]** When someone asks how we're doing, our habit may be to say we're fine and get on with it. It can take courage to let somebody build us up, too. We belong to Christ together. There will be days when our faithful response is to offer what we have, and days when it is to receive what someone else has been given to share.

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3 Paul N. Anderson, "A Theology of Presence," Evangelical Friend (1993): 4, https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ccs/312.

BRING WHAT YOU HAVE

[Display the Visio Divina image of hands holding seeds. Pause.] **[Slide 16]**

Look at the hands for a moment. There is soil on them, and the seeds are still there in the open. If you've ever put a seed in the ground, you know how little there is to show for it when you walk back to the house. You did the planting. What happens next will take time, and there is much about it you can't see.

The servant puts the money in the ground so he can bring it back exactly as it was. A person planting a seed puts it in the ground trusting that something can grow there. I think most of us know what it feels like to hold something in our hands and be somewhere between those two decisions. We could keep it safe. We could offer it and see what God does with it.

As we settle into open worship, let the Lord show you what is in your hands. **[Slide 17]** It may be time you can give, a word you've been holding back, or a bit of courage you've been waiting to feel before you take the first step. You may have a name already. Hold that person before Christ for a moment and listen.

Friends, the One who gave himself for us knows what he has entrusted to us. We can bring it to him with open hands.

What have I buried that Christ is inviting me to offer?

[Leave space for silence.]