

“Passivity Judged”
Matthew 25:14-30
November 10, 2019

INTRODUCTION:

Matthew 24 and 25 are about one thing—the Second Coming of Christ. Jesus teaches us that his return is both certain to happen and uncertain in its timing. And since we don't know the time of his return, we are to be ready at all times. Jesus presents four parables to help us be ready. The first, about a bad servant who thinks the master's return will be long-delayed and then abuses the household for his own purposes, teaches us not to conclude that his return will necessarily be in the far off future. The second, about unprepared bridesmaids who would have been ready had the bridegroom showed up soon, makes the opposite point and teaches us to be ready in case his return is not soon. Today's parable makes another point about being ready, instructing us on what we are to do as we wait. Enthusiastic service is commended and passivity condemned.

So this parable is about this familiar enemy of passivity. Are you acquainted with this foe? I was visiting a church once, and while walking in heard someone point out something on the grounds of that church that needed some attention. This person then went on to utter the classic passivity statement: “Someone should do something about that.” Those guilty of the sin of passivity are always waiting on someone else to do something about a need. They wait to give their money to the church, hoping that others will step up and provide what's needed. They wait for others to volunteer for jobs so they won't have to. A passive husband waits on his wife to take spiritual leadership in the home. A passive, unhappy employee complains about bosses and conditions at work but never takes any positive steps to make things better.

It would seem from Jesus' parable today that passivity is a bigger problem than we often recognize. Twenty years ago, Larry Crabb wrote a book called *The Silence of Adam*. It was about Adam's passivity in the first sin. He pointed out that the text in Genesis makes it clear that Adam was present during the entire time that Satan was speaking his words of temptation to Eve. Yet Adam remained silent, and his passivity has led to great trouble for us all. The parable of the talents describes first the commendable and faithful activity of the righteous as well as the passivity of the condemned. Let's look further at these two ways to live.

I. Faithful Activity

The parable concerns a wealthy man who must go on a journey that will likely keep him away from home for quite a while. So he summons three of his servants and entrusts to them his assets. To one he gives five talents, to a second two and a third one. A talent was the largest measurement of money in this day, equivalent to about 6000 days of labor for the average worker. So in our context a talent would be worth about a million dollars.

The first two servants act commendably, using the time of the master's absence to double his money. When the master returns, he commends them clearly and strongly with the words we all want to hear on Judgment Day: **“Well done, good and faithful servant”** (v. 21, 23). Let's look a little more carefully at their faithful activity. The first thing I notice about it is their enthusiasm for the work, indicated by the words “at once” in verse 16. In Greek, the original language of the New Testament, word order is generally not necessary for meaning, unlike in English where meaning is related to word order. So the order in which words appear in Greek can be used for emphasis, with the words given emphasis by appearing earlier in the sentence. The words “at once” are given emphasis in this sentence by appearing first.

When you lack enthusiasm for a job, you find reasons to avoid getting down to the work. Yardwork is in that category for me, and I can find lots of reasons to put it off for another day. Sometimes if there are no reasons for delaying the work, you can make one up. That's what the sluggard of Proverbs does, saying, **“There's a lion outside! I shall be killed in the streets!”** (Prov. 22:13). But on the other hand, if it's a day when I get to ride my bike on a great route with fellow cyclists, I make necessary preparations the night before, get up early the next morning and eagerly get to it. That's the way these first two servants go about their work.

I notice, too, that there are three active verbs used to describe what they do. He *went*, he *traded* and he *made*. The first word simply means to “go.” Getting started is often the hardest thing to do. I have often found it to be the case that the hardest step in any work is the first step. The tendency is to procrastinate and look for reasons to put something off, but this faithful servant immediately got started. He then *traded*, which just means that he got down to the business the master intended for him. Such trading would have involved risk, and I think all work for the Lord has an element of risk in it. So we don't let ourselves be paralyzed by fear. Instead, we trust the Lord and move out into the works he calls us to do. The subtitle for Larry Crabb's book I referred to earlier, *The Silence of Adam*, is “Becoming Men of Courage in a World of Chaos.” The third verb, *made*, describing how he “made” a profit, in one case of five talents and in the other of two, indicates that he persevered and finished the work. It's been said that the hardest steps in any job are the first one and the last one, and I think there's a great deal of truth in that.

When the master returns home to settle accounts, we can feel again the enthusiasm of these two servants. They are eager to show the master the results of their labors, indicated by the word translated “here” in the sentence, **“Here I have made five talents more”** (v. 20). It means literally to behold or see. On my day off this week, I did some projects around the house. Wendy was out of town, and when we connected via Facetime on Thursday night, I was eager to show her what I had done. That’s the case with these first two servants.

And then we see the Lord’s rewards. Jesus is more excited about rewarding his faithful servants than many Christians seem to be about receiving rewards. There are three rewards listed here. There is first of all his verbal commendation: **“Well done, good and faithful servant”** (v. 21, 23). In all three parables on the Second Coming of Christ and Judgment Day, it is faithfulness that is commended. Jesus’ servants are entrusted with different levels of giftings, indicated by these different talents. The gifts and abilities you have are Jesus’ decision, not yours. What we are all accountable for is our faithfulness in using whatever gifts Jesus has given us. You don’t need to spend any time wishing you had gifts different than what you do have, because you have no control over that. And focusing on the gifts you don’t have has the added problem of diverting you from being faithful with the gifts you do have.

The second reward is greater responsibility. **“You have been faithful over little; I will set you over much”** (v. 21, 23). It’s significant that he would refer to five talents, equivalent to five million dollars in our day, as only a little. Apparently, it is a little only in comparison to the much greater responsibility given as a reward to this servant. The fact that such significant responsibility is considered by Jesus to be a reward shows work as it was before the fall and the curse placed upon it after Adam and Eve’s sin. Part of the joy of heaven will be the removal of the curse placed upon work, thus restoring labor to the life-giving endeavor God always had in mind for it.

The third reward is the greatest. **“Enter into the joy of your master”** (v. 21, 23). Everyone knows that heaven is marked by everlasting joy, but many forget that the source of this joy is the presence of Jesus. What makes heaven to be paradise is his presence.

Let me mention three applications before we move to the third servant. First, this parable gives us a reason to get up every morning. As rates of depression and suicide climb in our nation, it is clear that many are suffering from a loss of meaning in their lives. A sense of meaning comes from embracing the identity portrayed in this parable. We are stewards of God, entrusted with gifts from him to be used for his purposes. And what are these purposes? We are to use our gifts for the benefit of the things God values. God values people, so we use our time and money to benefit people. God values his Church, so we

use our time and money for its benefit too. The way we decide what to do with our lives is through recognizing where our gifts meet the world's needs.

A second application is to act. These two faithful servants went to work and they stayed at work. We are often content just thinking about things, but we must press forward to action. I found it very helpful to ask this question, both of myself and of others: "Is there some step you believe God wants you to take?" Talking about something is not the same as doing something.

Third, never allow yourself to become idle in serving your master, Jesus. As we age, it is true that our abilities and capacities will decline, and our activity level along with that. But it is never the case that we should stop completely in our service to the Lord. Rosemarie Miller is the widow of Jack Miller, founder of Serge mission agency, with whom many of our missionaries serve. She is now 95 years old and still serving in London. She was recently hospitalized, and it looked as if she might not pull through. She had a strong will to live, though, because she said she didn't feel like her work was yet done. Like her, may we all work for the Master until the day he returns!

II. Fearful Passivity

When the third servant appears before the master, it becomes clear that he has been a do-nothing steward. In clear contrast to the enthusiastic activity of the first two servants, he simply took his talent and buried it. His explanation is revealing on a number of different levels. **"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"** (v. 24-25). His words indicate that his primary concern was not the interests of the master, but his own interests. He was self-preoccupied, concerned only with what would happen to him and doing what he could to preserve his welfare.

His offense against the master goes even further when he essentially blames the master for his own laziness. He was a do-nothing servant, he said, because the master was a "hard man." This is the same kind of response given by Adam after he ate the forbidden fruit. **"The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate"** (Gen. 3:12). Both Adam and this servant had a victim mentality, viewing themselves as helpless victims of forces out of their control. Jesus says this is **"wicked and slothful"** (v. 26). It is wicked in blaming God and seeing him as evil. We are being slothful when we use a victim mentality to excuse our inactivity.

The response of the third servant shows us the main two causes of passivity. It is as we address these two causes that we will be able to overcome passivity in our lives. The first cause is a wrong view of God. Bad theology is

always toxic. This servant believed that the master was a hard man. But he was believing a lie. With the one talent entrusted to this servant, the master was trusting him with a fortune, not to mention the even greater amounts to the first two servants. What's more, the master would have been satisfied with very little. **“You ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and at my coming I should have received what was my own with interest”** (v. 27). When we believe lies about God, it leads to sin. These lies are too numerous to mention, but all of them are rooted in forgetting the gospel. The central truth of God, the truth that exposes all other lies, is that he has loved us to death, his death. He has made us sons and daughters. He did all this even when we were still his enemies. It is the grace of God that leads to faithful service of God. God's grace transforms our work from “have to,” as in “I have to do this job,” to “get to.” I get to do this job for the sake of the one who has loved me and will always love me.

The second cause of passivity is seeing ourselves as victims rather than active agents. A victim mentality is accompanied by the attitude of self-pity. The statement of this third servant reeks with self-pity. He lives in a world that is stacked against him, or so he thinks. He's so powerless—what can he do? He can trust God, author of all of our life circumstances. And as he trusts God, he can move out in faithfulness. Maybe he doesn't have as much money entrusted to him as the first two servants. But he can be faithful with what has been entrusted to him. Maybe you can't give to the Lord of your money and time to the same degree as others. That's okay, as long as you don't use your lack of those things as an excuse to do nothing.

So we can move out in the world with confidence, taking risks when necessary. We can trust God. We need fear no longer. You're not a victim. You're a son or daughter of God and your life is full to the brim with meaning. There is a stewardship that has been given to you. There are people that you are uniquely situated to love and to reach with the good news of Jesus. There are jobs that you are uniquely gifted to do, both within the Church and without.

CONCLUSION:

Is there some step God wants you to take in being a faithful steward with what he has entrusted to you? Perhaps it's financial. A talent in this parable, after all, is a monetary unit. But the parable is about more than money. It's about everything God has entrusted to you. What would it look like to use these things for God?

Small Group Discussion Questions
Matthew 25:14-30

1. This parable makes it clear that our waiting for the Lord's return is not to be spent in idly killing time, but in the productive and active serving of Jesus. Who have you known who has remained active in such service well into old age?
2. The first two servants remain active and faithfully serve the master, while the third is condemned for his laziness and passivity. How would you define passivity? What are some examples of it? How does this sin work in your life?
3. The first servant goes "at once" to use the five talents entrusted to him for the benefit of his master, indicating some enthusiasm for his work. What do you think makes the difference between "have to" in our work for the Lord and "get to"? In other words, how can we be more enthusiastic in our work?
4. The three active verbs for the first two servants are "went," "traded" and "made." These three speak of beginning the work, doing the work and finishing the work. The middle one, "traded," indicates some risk. Which of these three do you find most difficult? That is, is it hard for you to get started? To engage in work that requires some risk? To finish a job?
5. Three rewards are mentioned here for faithful stewards: the commendation of the master ("Well done, good and faithful servant"), increased responsibility and entering the joy of the master. Does the thought of heavenly reward motivate you? Should it?
6. It was mentioned in the sermon that this parable gives us a reason to get up in the morning. We are stewards of God entrusted with resources that are intended to be used for God's purposes. This suggests the importance of understanding something of your life purpose. How does the idea of having a life purpose strike you? Do you have one? If so, what is it?
7. Based on his words to the master, what would you say motivates the third servant?
8. This third servant has a victim mentality marked by self-pity. How do these things reveal a lack of trust in God? Do you ever struggle with a victim mentality and its accompanying self-pity?