

“Stewardship for Joy’s Sake”
Matthew 25:14–30
Rev. Seth Richardson
January 29, 2017 – Evening Service

In this study we will learn about work so let’s start by looking at Matthew 25. We will also be referring to Genesis 1 as well. First, I want to set the context for this parable of the talents in Matthew. The triumphal entry has occurred and Jesus enters the last days of His ministry on earth. He would stay each evening in the town of Bethany and in the morning He would come into the city where He would teach and minister in the temple. On this particular day His disciples confront Him at the Mount of Olives asking Him a particular question about some teaching He had given around the destruction of the temple. Then Jesus takes this opportunity and preaches one of His sermons recorded in Matthew’s account. This sermon is known as the Olivet Discourse and in this sermon He teaches them things they need to look for, signs of the times or things that would come to pass before His return. So in the midst of this destruction about the coming of the Kingdom there is this cluster of parables and illustrations.

These parables are similar. They start in Matthew 24 with the lesson of the fig tree. There is an illustration of Noah and the judgment would come to those who were ill prepared. He told parables of stewards and wedding attendants who were to be prepared at the return. Each of these parables are instructing the disciples to be attentive, to live with a degree of awareness that the Kingdom is coming and to be ready. In the midst of this cluster of parables Jesus then gives them this parable of stewardship.

Matthew 25:14–15 says *[14] For it (the Kingdom) will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted to them his property. [15] To one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away.* The first point is this; the Master has lavished grace and incredible privilege upon his servants. How do we know this? It would be helpful if we understood what a talent was. A talent is speaking of a particular amount of income, specifically one talent being worth about 20 years wages. Think about this. In those days it would have been common for slaves to have risen to a place of stewardship and be entrusted to do business on behalf of the master. So the idea of a servant being entrusted would not be new, but it would be absurd almost for this amount that they would be entrusted.

If you put this in today’s perspective let’s just say the average manager makes about \$100,000 a year. That would mean that the servant who received one talent was just given two million dollars. The amount of cash given to these three men in this parable, comes to an amount in our day to over 16 million dollars. So you see this lavishness of what this master is entrusting to his servants. Because this is a parable, Jesus may have been using what is called a hyperbole, a purposeful exaggeration to prove His point but that’s exactly the point and that is that the Master has lavished grace and privilege upon His people. This takes us back to Genesis 1.

In Genesis 1, in which we call the cultural mandate we see this; Genesis 1:26–27 says *[26] Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.” [27] So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.* This is a familiar passage but think of it this way.

Moses is writing to the people of God, the nation of Israel, in the wake of leading them out of 400 years of slavery. They were property and in servitude under the King of Egypt, the Pharaoh. This is twice as long as we have been a nation here in the US. They had never known a time when they weren't a slave and God says 'You're going to be filled with the dignity of bearing My image, to represent Me in all of the world and I will give you dominion over the created world so that I'm going to reign through you. You will be My co-regents, co-rulers. I know you were slaves and in bondage but I will deliver you and rule on My behalf.' Do you see the privilege and the grace lavished upon us in this passage?

Let me illustrate this. Some of you are doctors and you have been given the gift to heal people. There is a group that faithfully gather on Wednesday to pray for they have a friend who has been dying and Thursday morning they show up at your office or in your operating room. Then you use the skills, gifts and abilities that God has bestowed upon you and you bring them to health. That faithful group praises God.

Imagine a wife and mother whose husband just lost his job because of corporate downsizing and she and her children would pray fervently every morning as dad is out looking for a job. On this day this man walks into your office and he performs well on the interview. You determine he is exactly what you need and you give him the job. This sweet family then praises God for your leadership and business.

Imagine a mother who for years has prayed for her wayward daughter and one afternoon in a coffee shop you say 'hello' to a young lady. Befriending her you share the grace of Christ and the Gospel that falls on her ears from your lips brings new life into her soul and she gives her life to Jesus to the glory of God. Do you see the lavish grace and privilege that God has bestowed on you, His servants?

Notice in Matthew 25:15 that He gave to each according to their ability. The word for ability here is simply the word for power. He gave them according to their power to accomplish that which He had entrusted. If He entrusted to them according to their ability/power then the next question is where did their ability/power come from? We see here that it was God who not only entrusted them with a stewardship but then entrusted them with the ability/power to carry it out. So when we talk about work and vocation we see that the calling upon your life is almost always associated with God's creative order, His design and how He has made you individually. He equips you in light of His purposes, not yours and He has entrusted to you responsibility to use your gifts, abilities, experiences and all your resources for His glory.

One of the things we like to talk about in the Fellows Ministry is what we call the sacredness of all callings. This is what we mean by that; not all callings are noble but every noble calling is sacred. That's important. One of the problems we often have in our life is we have this tendency to divorce our life so that we have these certain categories of life that we call sacred or spiritual. These would include our discipleship ministry, Bible study, devotions or Sunday morning worship and that is good and proper. Then we have this second category of life that we would put as secular and perhaps some things that fit in this category would be our dealings with the world, our work and these mundane aspects of our life where we can't see how the Kingdom of God overlaps in these areas. Therefore we might struggle to understand what it looks like to be His method and means of the Kingdom in our work.

Here's the point. The reason that all noble callings are sacred is because it's the Caller who gives those callings out. It is He in His purposes and His design assigns the tasks for us to walk in. So now let's look at the second point.

Matthew 25:16–18 says [16] *He who had received the five talents went at once and traded with them, and he made five talents more. [17] So also he who had the two talents made two talents more. [18] But he who had received the one talent went and dug in the ground and hid his master's money.* So the second point is to walk in grace but get to work. There are two things that I think would strike the listener in this parable. The first thing is that the unfaithful servant just put two million dollars in a hole in his backyard. I wish I was his neighbor. In a moment we'll get to the reason and what was going on with the unfaithful servant.

Notice this other thing here that is a bit repetitive and is meant to kind of stand out. It is the word 'more.' The one with five talents and the one with two talents were given more. Often when we think of investments our tendency is to go to finances. When I look at my retirement investments I have one simple prayer and that is that the graph is going up and not down. That kind of passive investment is ok and good but it's not necessarily what is in view in this text.

Let's look at what the person with five talents did. The person with five talents traded them. The word traded here literally means that he engaged in industry. He went to work. So the idea while we were given such grace and lavished with such wonderful privilege, the expectation of the Master is to get stuff done, to accomplish things, to be productive, to cultivate and bring about flourishing and fruitfulness.

In Genesis 1 it says man was put in the Garden to work it and keep it. So man was supposed to enter the Garden that God had created and keep it, protect it and he was supposed to work it, literally to cultivate the Garden. This means that in the creation itself God has put potential where He has called us to engage our creative resources to cultivate them and bring out our potential. So His expectation upon us is that we would be about expanding, growth, development and to cultivate this garden.

When the faithful stewards were faithful with what had been entrusted to them, they were entrusted with more. We call this in the Fellows Ministry the faithfulness arch which is as we are trusted with some God then entrusts us with more. This can be applied to your talents, abilities, resources, experiences, and perspectives but it creates this arch. The point is that it was never meant to plateau. You don't see the Master telling these faithful servants 'You got it done, you did good, now go take a break.' No, they are entrusted with more.

So no matter where you are in your life (beginning, middle, end) you have to be asking these questions. One, what has God entrusted to me? Two, how am I to cultivate it, expand it, grow it? Three, what is God wanting me to accomplish in this lifetime? Four, in this faithfulness arch what has happened in my past, whether it's the skills He has given me, or the experiences I have had or the losses that have occurred and I have learned from, that are talents that He is wanting me to reinvest as I move forward to bring about a greater return for His Kingdom?

I want to further illustrate this because when we often fall into this bifurcated life of sacred and secular, particularly those of us not gifted in ministry, teachers or evangelists, we may not understand how readily our gifting fits into the Kingdom. This week I spent some time with one of our former fellows who is getting his PhD in Industrial Psychology. He explained to me that on a large scale they do a lot of data mining and statistical research. In essence he crunches numbers and does research to help industry to be more profitable, efficient and to address HR issues. Right now in this world of suffering and calamity whether for physical reasons or weather reasons there are many people who have been made refugees all over the world and this is still a complex social problem with many questions still left to be answered. This fellow

realizes he has a particular set of gifts, he is staring at an opportunity and he has a desire to engage. So he is going to use his research in some way to address this.

I got a call from a person yesterday who said he was starting a business up in Chattanooga to provide jobs for those who coming out of the prison system. He went on to tell me that God had given him a certain set of gifts with certain opportunities before him and he had the desire to press into this issue before him that needs the Gospel.

There is this group of business people have this business plan to create manufacturing plants throughout Eastern Europe in proximity of institutional orphanages. Many times these boys and girls age out of the program and instead of entering into a life of crime, poverty or prostitution, the thought was that if they have viable profit making industry then they could provide jobs to these young people that restore the dignity of work and see people come to Christ.

Here is one of my favorite stories that illustrate this. Some years ago I had this opportunity to work with this orphanage in Zambia. I went over there for about 10 days and met with the man who founded the orphanage. He wasn't a missionary per say or a pastor for his theology wasn't that great, but he was a retired owner and operator of an IT company. God gave him the desire, opportunity and skills to go to Zambia to start an orphanage. He bought some property. Then he needed some buildings and nobody around there had any jobs. So he bought some cement, a mixer and a portable brick kiln and employed these men around the village to start making bricks. They got so good at making the bricks that they could make better bricks at a lower cost than anyone in the region so after the orphanage got up and running they had the idea to sell their bricks as a profit source and revenue stream that could be fed back into the orphanage. More and more children were coming into the orphanage and then they realized they needed a school. They needed to train some teachers from the continent of Africa to move in and educate these children to give them hope, the Gospel and a future.

The problem was in the country of Zambia at the time there was 80 percent unemployment. So 80 percent of eligible people were walking around all day. So they could train these kids to do these jobs but there was no jobs to be had so because he had bought this big piece of property they decided to start a farm on this property as well. They were very productive and fruitful with this farm and it just so happened they were located on the popular North and South highway in Zambia. They decided to buy a truck and higher some men to teach them how to do business. They taught them how to go up and down the highway to sell their produce at wholesale to all the shops along the way. They made more money and created a profit center and revenue streams to do what? It was so they could build more buildings and save more orphans. It gets better.

After years of doing this they got really good at this wholesale food industry and they had the skills, the opportunity and they were filled with Godly desire to help and realized the nation of Zambia imports a large part of their poultry every year. So they decided to build chicken farms so they could put more and more people to work around them. They approached the government and struck a deal with them that they would provide all the chicken for the government. So they are making more money, to put more people to work, so they can put it back into the orphanage, so they can save more orphans so they can hear the Gospel. This wasn't a pastor or a theologian or a missionary who started this. It was just a businessman who had the skills, the deep desire and the opportunity and God is using him.

This past week I had the opportunity to share with the elders and we were talking about millennials. I was sharing some positive things we can learn from this generation and it brought

out what I believe are these three issues with the church at large. The first issue is that the church has no theology. We don't teach Bible. Millennials don't like that and neither do we. Two, is that the church has bad theology. The third is a little bit seductive for we either have no theology, bad theology or we only have theology. The transforming truths of the Gospel and the grandeur of His Word are not transformative in such a way that it moves and motivates us into the brokenness of the world to take the Gospel. And to see both institutions and individuals changed with the Gospel.

If you parented in my generation then you are familiar with Elmo from Sesame Street. Elmo had one major indictment from all of his friends and that was he spent too much time in the bathtub. Elmo had a rubber ducky and enjoyed the bath time so much. Sometimes we can be guilty of just swimming in our theology bathtub, soaking in it to the point where our fingers get wrinkly and we don't engage in the brokenness and needs of the world and take the resources and gifts. I will say this to commend Briarwood; when our fellows come here they see how we are engaged and they see it happening and they love it. Let's do more.

Let's look at the third point. Jesus insinuates at this point in the parable that the servants don't think the master is coming back. Matthew 25:19–23 says [19] *Now after a long time the master of those servants came and settled accounts with them.* [20] *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.'* [21] *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.**'* [22] *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.'* [23] *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.**'*

One of the things we have to do in the church today is that we just have to hustle. We realize that it is becoming harder and harder to be a Christian in this culture. Data is coming in about the millennial generation that basically says that you are hard to manage. In essence, this generation wants more for less. I'm not here to argue whether this is true or not because for many of the millennials I know this is not true. The point is that whether or not this is true, it is believed to be true. The only way that you will find a platform to take the Gospel that transforms both institutions and individuals is that you're simply going to have to work harder than everyone else. Yes we pray for revival and this year in particular we are beseeching God to do a work in our hearts, our church, our city and our nation that would spill out to all of the world. We pray 'revive us O Lord' but here is what I've seen over my years.

Those who pray the most work the hardest. It's just like my coach would say, 'it's just time to get after it.' We just need to get to work. I'm speaking to come coaches right now when I say don't you just want to pull your hair out when you see that kid that has been given all the talent in the world but won't finish the sprint. They just won't hustle, but who do you love? It is that kid that might be one inch shorter, not quite as fast or the ability of those others but they maximize all they have just to hustle. I tell my kids 'there are a lot of things in this world that you can't control but you can always control your attitude and your effort. The way the church is positioned now we are praying fervently for God to revive this nation but quite honestly that just means you and I have to work harder. We're just going to have to hustle.

Do you know why we hustle and work? It is to hear the words 'well done, good and faithful servant.' We want to please the Father. In this vision of our lives it pulls us forward and motivates us to move, work, engage, give and sacrifice because we love Him and He has first

loved us. There is a clear doctrine of reward in heaven but what has happened in our kind of materialistic approach to life is that when Jesus said He would go prepare us a place, we interpret that as He is going to prepare for us a mansion. We have even turned heaven into a place of our status and affluence. The reality is that the reward in heaven isn't the stuff. The merit and value of our reward isn't the reward but being rewarded. It's the joy of our Father.

Every time you talk about work you have to bring up the movie Chariots of Fire. It is the true story of Eric Liddell. He was a British missionary who had been given gifts to run in the Olympics. There is part where he is having a confrontation with his sister who says to him, 'you're wasting your life Eric, you need to go be a missionary' and he says 'I will be a missionary in time but when I run I feel God's pleasure.'

In 1921 Charles Strite invented the toaster oven and I am thankful for the toaster oven. It is because of toaster ovens that many of us have gotten our children to school on time and we have enjoyed Eggo waffles. Here is deep theology and here is the question. When do toaster ovens glorify Charles Strite? It is when they make good toast. Every time the toaster oven makes good toast it glorifies its creator and that is the very same joy God is calling you and I in that when we live out our calling, what He created us, redeems us and sustains us to do, we glorify the One who created us to do so. So that all the world will look at Him and not at us. So we live and rejoice in the lavish grace that we have been given. We celebrate this lavish grace but we get to work and we work to please the Father and enter into His joy.

The Scripture says that it was for joy that it was set before Him that our Lord Jesus endured the cross. Jesus our Savior was the One who was absolutely faithful. He was the perfect steward who accomplished the task that God had given Him. In spite of the pain, burden and cost of atoning for our sin for joy's sake He entered the joy of His Master by finishing the work at the cross, the God who entrusted Him. Let's pray.

Prayer:

Father, we ask You to give a vision of a life worth living and sear deep in our souls that You by Your grace have enlisted us and that we are Your means and Your methods. Father, we pray that when we work You would bless the work of our hands and that as we share the Gospel You would bless the work of our lips. We pray that when we sit down to build strategy that it would be You that would lead and bless the thoughts of our minds. Father, we pray that when we build businesses that these businesses would be for Your glory and for the good of people around us, not for our status or affluence. We pray that in this world You would make us givers and not takers but most of all Lord Jesus we pray that You would be honored and glorified that we would hear 'well done thy good and faithful servant,' Amen.

Power Point

Stewardship and Sojourning

- Stewardship is the entrusting of resources to care for and cultivate; or a task to accomplish. Sojourning is to be one who passes through a territory without taking up residence.
- Stewardship began at creation. Sojourning began at the Fall.
- We will be stewards in the New Heavens and Earth. We will not be sojourners.
- As stewards and sojourners, we don't hold too loosely nor too tightly to this world.

Truths about the Master

Truths about the Unfaithful Steward

Truths about the Faithful Steward