



"Nothing from Nothing"

*A Sermon delivered by Rev. Dr. Benjamin Boswell at Myers Park Baptist Church
on November 12, 2023, from Matthew 25:14-30*

Picture me in a cobalt blue collared shirt with yellow lettering, standing behind a tall counter with a welcome smile, scanning plastic membership cards, and repeatedly saying the same six words again and again, "Remember to be kind and rewind." Yes, before I was a minister, I was a manager of a Blockbuster Video store in Cary, NC. I know it's hard for some of you to picture me in that setting, but I bet many of you can smell the popcorn right now as you remember with deep nostalgia the great cultural phenomenon of going to the video store on a Friday or Saturday night to pick out a movie. It's an experience my daughter will never have because her entire life has been lived in the era of streaming. My how things have changed so quickly!

While I was working at Blockbuster another little company started a subscription-based DVD mailing service and my boss Mike thought it was the stupidest idea. He regularly made fun of the company and said it would never catch on. He believed Blockbuster would crush them, and the new company would be out of business in a few years. He was not alone. All Blockbuster's executives felt the same way. In fact, when the CEO of that little DVD company approached Blockbuster with an offer to partner together, he was laughed out of their office.

That CEO was Reed Hastings, and this little DVD company was called Netflix, the first video streaming service. In one year, they grew revenue by 11 billion dollars and their subscribers by 100 million and put Blockbuster out of business in three years. No more getting in the car, driving to the store, hoping there's a copy of the video you want. Now every movie ever made is at your fingertips in the comfort of your own home.

What companies like Blockbuster, Kodak, and Blackberry show us is that when we're faced with change, crisis, opportunity, new ideas or technology in the volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous world we live in, the most dangerous thing we can do is nothing. I realize this is a counter intuitive claim. Caution suggests that if we do nothing, we can avoid danger and risk. Many believe doing nothing is the safest and most prudent option.



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But this way of thinking imagines we are outside of time and history, immune to permanent change and evolution. It is to live in blind denial of the reality that there is always risk, danger, and cost to doing nothing. Sometimes we hope that by doing nothing, we won't be culpable for losses or bad things that happen; that if we don't do anything we're not responsible for what occurs. But this is wrong! If a child we're caring for runs into oncoming traffic and we do nothing, we're still responsible for what happens. We call that negligence.

The Parable of the Talents in Matthew 25 is a parable about negligence—the risk, cost, peril, and danger of doing nothing. And I find it necessary to approach this parable from that perspective, because it is both one of the most popular and most wildly misinterpreted texts in the Bible. In fact, scheduling this text during the season of stewardship was a rather common thing for me to do. More stewardship sermons have been preached on this text than any other in history, which means there are countless ways we can miss the meaning of the story. So, I've developed five rules for interpreting this parable. 1) Don't make it about eternal judgement in the afterlife or hell. 2) Don't make God or Jesus into the Property owner. 3) Don't make it into an endorsement of capitalism or investment banking. 4) Don't make it into a prosperity gospel of maximizing wealth. 5) Don't make it about productivity.

As Americans, we are immersed in a capitalist society and tend to read the Parable of the Talents through the lens of our economic system. In fact, one scholar called this parable, "every capitalist's favorite story!" However, regardless of our economic proclivities, we cannot fail to notice that popular interpretations of this parable are responsible for infecting us with the horrifying ideology that the poor are lazy. Or worse, that people are poor because they're lazy. Whenever Jesus' words are used to shame the poor, we must take off our American Capitalist lenses so we can read the gospel more accurately, because Jesus loved the poor and never shamed them, and bad interpretations of the bible are incredibly dangerous.

One poor campesino in Nicaragua named Oscar, once told his priest, Ernesto Cardenal, "If somebody who's interested in money reads this gospel in their own way, these words are going to make them worse than they were before!" The five rules I have for this parable are intended to prevent us from projecting our cultural proclivities onto the text and becoming worse people than we were before we read it.



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At first glance, the Parable of the Talents does not seem commensurate with Jesus' other teachings on money, which is why some scholars claim Jesus didn't actually say it and others believe the moral of the story is to be like the third slave and subvert the master's system of economic exploitation, but I believe that stretches the parable too far. So, we must look more carefully. The relationships in this story are less like Master and slaves, and more like a Boss and three managers. Notice, the Boss did not actually praise the first two managers for making good investments. There is no full-throated affirmation of investing here. This parable does not affirm free market capitalism or the financial services industry. First, the implication is that the first two managers didn't invest at all. Second, investing in the bank is described as the last resort! These words about investing born of the Boss' anger and frustration with the third manager. He was infuriated when he proclaimed that investing money in the bank was the **second worst** thing a person can do.

The only thing worse than investing money in a bank was burying it in the ground, which means investing is only slightly better than doing nothing! Please don't try that message tomorrow at Bank of America, Wells Fargo, or Truist. It won't get you very far. It's important that the focus of the story is not on how much the managers were given, or how much they made, but what they did with it. This parable is a comparison between those who did something with what they were given and one who did nothing.

You may have noticed my title today comes from that famous Billy Preston song about the mathematics of love, "Nothin' from nothin' leaves nothin'. You gotta have somethin' if you wanna be with me." It's a simple yet profound message. You can't get something from nothing. Zero minus zero is zero. Nothing subtracted from nothing equals nothing. It's the basic mathematics of life. The song essentially says that if you want to be in a relationship, you need to bring something to the table, or you'll get nothing.

It's easy for us to complain about not having enough in our lives—enough love, time, effort, money. But unless we do something, bring something, give something, we shouldn't be surprised if we get nothing. A more positive way to put this is "we get out what we put in," which is not just true of our relationship with other people, but our relationship with God, the church, and the community. We can't get something from nothing. Nothin' from nothing leaves nothin'!



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Unfortunately, a lot of us approach church as if we're trying to get something from nothing. We give nothing, contribute nothing, or offer very little of our time, talents, and treasure, yet we expect the church to give us everything. Can you imagine if your child, spouse, or friend said to you, "Every week on Sunday morning at 10 am I need you to give me a full-body massage and I expect you to put everything you have into this massage and give it to me willingly and cheerfully with a smile on your face, no questions asked. But I will be giving you nothing in return. Well, that's exactly not true. If you really need it and beg for it three times a year in the Spring, Fall, and again at Xmas, I will give you a light pat on the back and say 'atta boy, good job.'" No one would agree to those terms! Yet, this is how many of us relate to the church—not to mention God! One of the things I've learned over the years in therapy and counseling countless couples is that unexpressed, unrealistic, or unmet expectations can be a big problem. But the death nail for any relationship is entitlement.

The third manager in the parable believed he was entitled to be afraid of his boss. Jesus gives us no indication of the boss' character at the beginning of the story, but the manager presumed he knew who the boss was and how he'd act. He tried to justify his entitlement by saying, "I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours." It is unclear whether the third manager actually believed the Boss was a harsh man or if he was using this as an excuse to justify his own behavior. Either way, the Boss saw right through his excuses and said, "If you really thought I was harsh, why didn't you just invest the money?" The Boss' question revealed that the manager engaged in willful inactivity, or that overwhelming fear caused the manager to do nothing.

When it comes to money, fear is one of the most powerful emotions that drives our behavior. Fear of losing money, fear of losing security and the peace of mind that comes with money, can petrify us into inaction. Fear is what drives us to hide our money, hoard our money, bury our money, or invest our money in the bank instead of sharing it with the world. But fear is a tricky emotion. Sometimes fear masquerades as a subtle anxiety about our financial security or an abundance of caution about our future. But we don't always experience it as fear. Sometimes it feels more like long-term planning, or making a rainy-day fund, or putting away a little extra for retirement, or investing in our children. These are all smart, good, rational things to do, but playing it safe can also be an excuse for keeping more than we need or being less generous, or worse; becoming selfish or greedy without even knowing it.



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The servant thought he could play it safe. He thought that if he did nothing, he couldn't make a mistake. He thought if he didn't do anything he couldn't do wrong. He thought if he buried it in the ground wouldn't lose it. But the servant was severely mistaken, and that's the mistake we often make. Jesus said, "Those who seek to save their lives will lose them. To those whom much is given, much is required." Fear is the opposite of faith. Faith requires action. To do nothing, to expect something from nothing, is the definition of being entitled and negligent with what we've been given. There's a quote that is often attributed to Edmund Burke that really belongs to the philosopher John Stuart Mill, who said, "The only thing necessary for evil to triumph is for good people to do nothing." (repeat)

I recently saw an interview with the actor Jim Carrey who talked about the dreams and fears of his father Percy. Jim grew up as the youngest of four children in the suburbs of Toronto and described his father as one of the funniest men alive. He said his father was also an incredible saxophone player whose dream was to make it big as a musician. The only way to do that was to move to America, but his father was afraid. He had a wife and large family to support, so he gave up his dream to be a musician and became an accountant. But then, after years of working as an accountant, at the age of 51, Percy was fired from his job and the Carrey family became homeless. Jim said, it killed his father's spirit. Reflecting on what happened to his father, Jim said, "It's one thing to fail while trying to fulfill your dreams, but another to fail at something you didn't want to do in the first place." Seeing what it did to his father, Jim decided he would never give up on his dream to become a comedian. Even though he failed over and over again, was rejected three times from *SNL*, and has never won an Oscar, Jim kept on trying and eventually found his way. He discovered one of life's most profound truths, something is always better than nothing. Even failure is better than nothing, because we learn from failure, and we learn nothing from nothing.

One of the things they don't teach you in seminary is that when you write a sermon, the first person you have to preach it to is yourself. This week as I was preparing this message I was convicted about my own giving. I filled out my own pledge card, like I always do, and wrote in the same amount I pledged last year. It's significant and I felt pretty good about myself. I felt righteous. But as I studied this parable, I realized I was playing it safe like the negligent manager. Pledging the same amount for next year as I pledged this year is not giving the same amount of money, because that's not how money works in America. There's this thing called inflation that goes up every year, and some years a whole lot. This year it was 3.7%. Last year it was 8%, and realized I was fooling myself into thinking that giving the same amount of money each year was a praiseworthy activity.



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In reality, giving the same amount this year as I gave last year isn't even keeping the status quo—it's giving less money. And if I do that every year, then I would be giving less and less money every year. I would feel like I was doing something, but in reality, I would be growing less and less generous. One of my favorite quotes from Benjamin Franklin is, "The problem with doing nothing is, you never know when you're finished."

So, I brought the pledge card I wrote at the beginning of the campaign that has the same pledge amount on it as it did last year (rip up pledge card and throw it in the air). Here's my new pledge card. It has a 20% increase to make up for a few years of stagnation in my giving. If you think this is a charade, you can ask Leigh Anne. She has no reason to lie to you. I'm increasing my pledge because I believe in this church. I trust its leaders. I am 100% sold on the direction we're going. I am fully invested in our mission of inclusivity, community, spirituality, and justice. I am all in on our vision of becoming the first truly interracial church in the history of Myers Park.

And if you're with me then I invite you to consider what you're giving and if you can move one mile further down the road toward generosity. I invite you to spiritually reflect on what generosity means to you and if you are growing in generosity. What is God is calling you to give? Maybe you've already made a pledge that looks the same as it did last year, like mine did. If so, I invite you to join me in ripping it up and making a new one. And if you do, I hope it gives you as much joy as it gave me.

One of the hidden messages in this story is that the managers who did something with what they were given found tremendous joy. That's because there is a joy that comes with doing something, joy that comes with giving, joy that comes with being generous. That's why people say it is better to give than receive, it leads to joy! And there's nothing our lives, our church, and our world needs right now more than joy. Joy is always born from thanksgiving—from the gratitude we exude for the gifts and the blessings we already have. Gratitude knows that all we have is not ours to begin with. We are simply the stewards of what we've been given, and as human beings and people of faith we're called to share what we have with others to make the church and the world a better place—to build beloved community. And when we share what we have with others—joy simply explodes around us.



Doing something, giving something, sharing something, brings joy into our lives, into the lives of the people we love, into the communities we serve, and into the troubled world where we reside. Giving is a statement about who we are, what matters to us, what our values are, who we want to be. So, we must ask ourselves, are we going to be a Blockbuster church in a Netflix age, or will we take action? Are we going to be like the negligent manager, or are we going to do something with what we've been given? Are we going to continue to be comfortable and content with doing nothing in a time that demands everything, or will we try something? Are we going to keep on trying to get something out of nothing from our relationship with people, with God, with the church, or are we going to do something? We need to give graciously, go the next mile, and move forward on our journey of generosity. Trying to get something out of nothing is pointless, because nothing from nothing leaves nothing, and you got to have something if you want the joy of community.