

From “Mine!” to “Yours!”

Matthew 25:14-30

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ September 24, 2023 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘

“For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; ¹⁵ to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. At once ¹⁶ the one who had received the five talents went off and traded with them and made five more talents. ¹⁷ In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. ¹⁸ But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master’s money.

¹⁹ After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. ²⁰ Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, ‘Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents.’ ²¹ His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things; I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.’ ²² And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, ‘Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents.’ ²³ His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things; I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.’

²⁴ Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, ‘Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow and gathering where you did not scatter, ²⁵ so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.’ ²⁶ But his master replied, ‘You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow and gather where I did not scatter? ²⁷ Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. ²⁸ So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. ²⁹ For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance, but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. ³⁰ As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness,

where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’
(Matthew 25:14-30, NRSV)

✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘

Ronald Read was born in 1921 in Dummerston, Vermont, to poor farmers. As a child he hitchhiked or walked 4 miles to school everyday. He persevered and was the first person in his family to finish high school. After serving in the army during World War II, he returned to Vermont where he spent the next 25 years working as a gas station attendant and mechanic. He then took a part-time job as a janitor at J.C. Penny where he worked another 17 years. He married later in life, never had children himself, but did help raise a few stepchildren. He owned a tiny little house he bought for \$12,000. In his free time he used to often stop in at a local hospital in his town and get a cup of coffee in their cafeteria. I’m guessing that was the best coffee in town. Or maybe he just enjoyed the company there. He also spent a lot of this time at the local library. He loved books, loved to read and to learn.

Ronald Read died in 2014 at the age of 92. In his will he took care of his surviving stepchildren. And then he left \$4.8 million to that hospital where he used to go and enjoy a cup of coffee. And to Brooks Memorial Library, where he used to love to go and read books, he left \$1.2 million, which was twice their annual budget.

Some people might call a man like that the epitome of frugality. Here was a man who knew how to live simply and spend wisely. That’s true, and those are good qualities. But one person who knew him and wrote about him better described him this way, “He understood the value of our brief and finite time on earth.”¹

Admittedly, not everybody admires a man like Ronald Read. Some in our world might call him a fool for choosing to live a simple life in a simple house when he could have lived an extravagant life in a mansion, at least towards the latter part of his life when he had the resources to do so. But I admire him. I suspect you do as well. And I want to know makes a man like that tick? What was it that helped him become so willing to hold so loosely to the things of this world for the benefit of others?

¹ Cited by John Ortberg, *Become New* podcast, “Pursue Generosity”, September 8, 2023.

I can also see how some might resent a story like this. You might say, “I don’t have nearly that much to give? I could never make that sort of impact with my life?” And yet, remember that Ronald Read was a gas station attendant, and a janitor, not a high-powered attorney or corporate executive. I don’t say that to disrespect blue collar professions. Manual labor can be honorable work, as honorable as any work. I say it because we live in a world that has deceived us into thinking that only some of us have been given enough to make a real difference. And that’s simply not true. You have been given far more than you probably realize.

That’s one of the primary things Jesus’ parable here teaches us.² In those days a talent was a measure of money. One talent was equivalent to about 6,000 denarii, and one denarius was equivalent to what a common laborer might earn in one day. In our time, a talent might translate to as much as \$1 million. Here’s the point. Each of these servants in Jesus’ parable, even the last who received the least, was put in charge of an extraordinary amount of wealth. Now, as is probably obvious, the master here is Jesus and we, God’s people, are the servants. Jesus left this earth at his ascension, just after his resurrection, and he has promised to return one day at the second coming. In the meantime where we live now, he has placed an extraordinary amount of what belongs to him in our hands to be used for his purposes. That’s not just true for some of us; it’s true for all of us. This parable is about you.

Most biblical commentators agree that Jesus isn’t speaking only here about money or material wealth. I agree with those who say that these talents represent any and all opportunities we have been given in this life.³ That certainly includes material wealth, what we might call treasure, but also includes our time, and our abilities, along with our relationships, and places of influence, and present circumstances of all kinds. And when you think about it that way, each of us truly has been entrusted with an extraordinary amount.

On average, we are each given nearly 30,000 days on this planet, that’s almost 700,000 hours. By some estimates, the typical person has about 16 encounters with others every day. That means, on average, you have nearly 500,000 opportunities in this life to engage with another person, half a million opportunities to leave people better than they were when you found them. Even a person who spends their entire life

working a minimum wage job will see hundreds of thousands, likely millions, of dollars pass through their hands. And who can possibly quantify all the abilities you have, natural and acquired, all the areas of influence, all the knowledge. God has placed an extraordinary amount in your hands.

It’s true that we all have been given different amounts. Jesus makes that fact very clear in this parable, where no two servants are given exactly the same. I believe that God, who knows you so well because he’s the one who put you together, has given you exactly what he knows you can handle with his help. He has given you everything you need to do what he has called you to do. But again, even the one who has been given the least, still finds himself or herself the trustee of an astonishing amount!

Another obvious reality Jesus makes clear in this parable is the fact that everything we possess, our very lives themselves, are a gift from him, and will one day be returned to him. Ultimately none of it belongs to us. Our friends Sue and Kent Kim sold us their Toyota Camry some years ago when my oldest, Isabel, was starting to drive. It’s been a fantastic car. All four of my kids have driven that car and it’s now down with my son at school. Every once in a while one of them will refer to it as “*my* car”. “Dad, I need some money to put gas in *my* car.” As soon as they make that mistake, they know what’s coming. “You’re car?” I say. “That’s fantastic. I didn’t realize that you were taking over all the insurance payments, taking care of all the maintenance and repairs, and now no longer need any gas money. That’s great news! Your mom and I can use that extra money to treat ourselves to something special.” I’ve annoyed my kids just enough to get them to move out when they graduate, but not so much that they still don’t like to come home to visit.

We all make this mistake, we get so used to being in possession of something that we begin to imagine that it belongs to us. Psalm 24:1 declares the truth, “**The earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it.**”⁴ I Corinthians 6:19 asks rhetorically, “**Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own?**” The talents given to the servants in the parable do not belong to them. They still belong to the master. He has only entrusted them into their hands for a time, to

² As a reminder, parable is a Greek word that literally means “to throw alongside”. Think of the world parallel and you get a sense of it. When Jesus used parables he simply took one thing, something familiar to us in our world, and placed it next to the Kingdom of God to teach us something about God’s ways, God’s designs, God’s truth. In this case, the familiar thing is a master who entrust his wealth to his servants when he goes away on a long journey. A classic definition of a parable was once given by scholar C.H. Dodd: “Parables arrest the hearer with

avidness and strangeness and leave the mind in sufficient doubt about the precise application so as to tease and promote active thought.”

³ Frederick Dale Bruner writes, “More fruitful [than the idea that a talent simply represents money] is the idea that a talent is any *opportunity* at all, each day, and this would include many realities: work, family, play, community, and even interruptions.” *Matthew: A Commentary*, Volume 2 (Eerdmans, 1990), 554.

⁴ This and all biblical citations are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

be used the way he would want them used. That's what it means to be a trustee, or a steward. That is what we are, with all that we possess.

In his classic work, *The Screwtape Letters*, C.S. Lewis writes, "The man can neither make, nor retain, one moment of time; it all comes to him by pure gift; he might as well regard the sun and moon as his [belongings]." ⁵ Do you live with this awareness, that everything you possess, every material thing, every cent, every moment, every breath, even your very body, is a gift on loan? Not something you earned, but a gift! We live in a world where everything has to be earned. Yet, our God has been extravagantly generous with us before we deserved a thing. The evidence, of course, that it's all on loan is that fact that one day, sooner or later, all of it will be taken away from you and there is not a thing you can do about it.

I remember when Esther and I went through pre-marital counseling over 30 years ago one of the things our wise counselor told us was that once we were married we needed to stop using the pronoun "my" in regard to our things. Once we became husband and wife, everything was "our". I remember the illustration he gave me, "Jeff, it's not even going to be your toothbrush anymore. It all belongs to Esther as well. Even your toothbrush belongs to both of you." To be clear, we do not share toothbrushes, at least on purpose. But his point stuck with me, and it's been a great benefit to our marriage to remember that everything I possess belongs to Esther as well. We are one.

In a similar way we need to cultivate in ourselves the reminder that it's not my money or stuff. It's not my time. These are not my abilities or talents. It's not my agenda or plans or dreams. It's not even my body. I need to switch from "Mine!" to "Yours!". All of it is yours, Lord. I am merely a trustee, entrusted with all these resources for a relatively short time. Coming to accept this truth may be the first and crucial step towards understanding, as Ronald Read understood, the value of our brief and finite time on earth.

Before we know it, that time will be over. And as Jesus' parable makes undeniably clear, on that day there will be a judgment. In fact, this parable is right in the middle of a whole sermon that Jesus gives about God's coming judgment. Beginning back in chapter 24 he speaks to his disciples about the end of the age, the coming of the Son of Man, and the time when all people of all history will come before the throne of God to give account for their lives. I understand that most of us like to avoid this reality, even dismiss it. But if you are

going to pay attention to Jesus, that's hard to do. Of the 148 stories or teachings in the Gospels, no fewer than 60 of them deal with the final judgment. ⁶ In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus' entire teaching ends with this chapter on judgment. Right after this he goes to the cross.

We love thinking about God's grace. If there were a hymn called *Amazing Judgment, How Sweet the Sound*, I guarantee you that nobody would request it. But the truth is that God's grace is only amazing in light of God's judgment. Grace is only amazing if it saves us from a terrible destiny, which is the righteous and deserved judgment and wrath of God for our sin. When we diminish or ignore God's judgment, we not only cheapen grace, we ignore Jesus. As commentator Dale Bruner puts it, "Only where there is real judgment can there be real grace." ⁷

There is a powerful prayer in the American Episcopal *Book of Common Prayer* that speaks to this. It's called "Prayer for Grace". I wonder if you would be willing to pray these words:

Imprint upon our hearts such a dread of thy judgments, and such a grateful sense of thy goodness to us, as may make us both afraid and ashamed to offend thee. And, above all, keep in our minds a lively remembrance of that great day, in which we must give a strict account of our thoughts, words, and actions to him whom thou has appointed the Judge of quick and dead, thy Son Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. ⁸

In the parable, the master returns and calls the servants each to come before him to give account for how they have used what it was which he entrusted to them in his absence. The text says he "settled accounts with them." This day will come for me, and it will come for you, when we also will stand before the Lord God and settle accounts. Nothing will be hidden from God on that day. It will be clear whether or not you and I thought in terms of "Mine!" or "Yours!". I know we don't like to think about this eventuality, but Jesus talks about it so often we would be foolish not to.

As this parable and Jesus' teaching elsewhere make clear, there are two possible outcomes. On that day some will be found to have been faithful stewards, and others will be found to have been unfaithful. In the story, the two faithful stewards invest what they have been given for the benefit of their master. Jesus tells us that they do so immediately, indicating their eagerness to be faithful. This is not a begrudging obedience.

⁵ C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (Bantam Books, 1982), 62.

⁶ Bruner, 533.

⁷ Bruner, 534.

⁸ Cited by Bruner, 535.

There are risks involved, to be certain. There always are when we try to invest something of value. But they are willing to take those risks. Somehow they knew their master well enough to know that this is what he wants them to do.

Again, I think the talents in this story represent opportunities, ordinary opportunities that present themselves countless times a day. This meantime between Christ's ascension and his second coming is a time of opportunity in which we are expected to put to profitable use whatever the Lord has placed in our hands. Whatever the Lord has given you now and will ask about later, those are the talents in your possession.

So for example, you receive a paycheck for honest work, or some unexpected money comes into your hands. Do you stop to consider how the Lord wants you to use those funds, his funds? It's not that Jesus wants us to give everything away. God is a good Father who wants to take care of his children. It's not wrong to use some of God's gifts on ourselves and our families, not only for necessities but even pleasures in life. But do we do so always remembering in gratitude the giver and owner of those gifts?

Or maybe God puts a person in your life, a neighbor, or coworker, or somebody you cross paths with regularly. What opportunity has God given you in that relationship to bless that person? It could be anything from sharing your faith when the time is right, to simply extending a kind word of encouragement that can change a day. Every encounter is an opportunity, a "talent" God places in your hands.

You have abilities and expertise and knowledge that you have developed and accumulated over time. Some of you are good with your hands, or sharp with numbers and finances, or fantastic listeners, or know how to fix things. Are you aware that those abilities don't belong to you, that the Lord has entrusted them to you for his purposes?

And we all have had experiences in life, many painful, from which we have learned a great deal. Even those are gifts from God which we can use to bless others who face similar circumstances. The growth which comes from suffering is not just for our own private benefit.

To be clear, I don't think that Jesus demands, or even expects, perfection here. Which one among us has even gone a single day, even a single hour, and fully offered up every aspect of our lives to God's glory? None of us have done that. I look back over my life and can't even begin to number the massive pile of missed opportunities along the way, so many times when I said

"Mine!" instead of "Yours!". I'm guessing you're the same. So instead of *perfection* here, I suspect what the Lord wants is *progression*. Are you increasingly becoming the sort of person who is loosening your grip on the things in life which don't belong to you in the first place? If so, then I think you can look forward one day to hearing those words that I suspect every last one of us longs to hear spoken to us from God, "Well done, good and trustworthy servant...enter into the joy of your master."

Yes, there is another potential outcome. The last servant is not deemed faithful in the end, and not welcomed into the joy of his master. It's instructive to note that he went off and buried his talent out of fear. To be clear, he takes \$1 million of his master's money and essentially hides it in his mattress. No wonder the master is angry! At least stick it in a mutual fund and let it collect a bit of interest! Now, maybe he was resentful because he did not receive as much as the others. I can see how that could have infected his thinking. Maybe he was insecure for the same reason. "My master must not think much of me since he gave me less than the others." That could also sap his initiative. More likely, he simply did not know his master well enough to know what he would want done with his resources. The master calls him lazy and wicked. Those are hard words, but they are Jesus' words.

It's easy to read this parable and let fear motivate us as we think about the day we will stand before God and give account. None of us wants to be that last servant. And I suppose that's not totally inappropriate, because Jesus does include this third servant as a cautionary figure. But I wonder if joy is a better motivator than fear. And so even though I don't want to ignore the outcome of the third servant, I want to focus on the outcome of the first two. This is a scary story, but Jesus tells it out of love.

You see, accolades in this world mostly have to do with the accumulation of wealth, or fame, or earthly power or influence, or impressive talents that become the envy of others. But when all is said and done at the end of time when we all stand before God's throne of judgment, do we really think that it will be the celebrities and the world leaders and so-called 'influencers' of our day who will receive the most impressive accolades from heaven? Some of them, maybe. But more likely it will be the person who generously and humbly served in obscurity – faithfully raising children to love and fear God, showing kindness to the least of these, going about their kingdom-business in ways that mostly go unnoticed outside of heaven. It's not wrong to seek accolades, the question is who you are seeking them from. Worldly accolades

are cheap and disposable. The accolades our Father in Heaven is ready to give us are the opposite. The one who has been faithful with a few things in this world, will stand to inherit much more in the world to come, including the eternal joy of God.

Some of you may think we only talk about stewardship this time of year, when we are preparing to pledge a portion of our financial resources to the ministry of this church in the year to come. I beg to differ. We actually talk about stewardship every single Sunday. Every week we take an offering. That does involve the offering of material treasure, but as we emphasize regularly around here, it's also an offering of our time and talents, of our whole lives really. During the offering there is usually a time when Eunice or somebody else plays some music, a space for us to be still and quiet. Before COVID we used to pass offering plates at that time. Some of you have asked what the point of this is now that no plates are being passed. I'm glad you asked. It's a time for each of us, at least once a week, to pause and remember that every single thing that we possess, even our bodies, even our lives, are a gift from God placed in our hands for a short time to use for his purposes.

You see, the money you may give as an offering is only a token, along with other parts of your life you may give back to God. God commands us to give back at least the first 10%, a tithe, of the financial resources we have received from him. But that doesn't mean that the remaining 90% is mine. The 10% given first is a constant reminder that the rest is still God's, even the portion he generously allows me to use on myself. We gather here the first day of the week and dedicate this time to worshipping God. But the giving of the first day reminds us each week that the other six belong to him as well, and are to be used for his purposes.

Every time we make these offerings, including today, it is an act of worship. We are declaring our faith and trust in the one who first offered everything to us. He is our judge, yes. We don't deny that. But the Judge became Jesus of Nazareth, the Judged One,⁹ who made it possible for us one day to stand before our righteous and holy God and receive grace, favor and eternal joy even though in far too many ways we have failed to be faithful in this life. It is gratitude – obedience, yes, but mostly gratitude – which leads us to hold loosely to everything God has placed in our hands that one day, by the grace of God, we might also hear God say to us, “Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy prepared for you.”

Amen.



The Next Step

A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. Read Matthew 25:14-30 again. What stands out to you from this parable Jesus tells?
2. How does the master's treatment of the third servant seem to you: Fair? Harsh? Lenient? Why?
3. Do you live with the constant sense that you are merely a trustee of everything you possess? Why or why not? Do you even believe this is true in the first place, that it all belongs to God?
4. How do you feel about the fact that one day you will have to stand before God and give an account for how you have made use of the life he gave to you?
5. How does grace and mercy factor into that day?
6. What is one 'talent' God has entrusted to you which you realize you are not using according to his wishes? How might things look differently if you started doing so?
7. Are there things we can do in life to help us learn to move from “Mine!” to “Yours!”? Be specific.
8. Where do you see yourself in this parable? What is Jesus teaching you here?

Table to Table: A Question for kids and adults to answer together.



If everything in this world belongs to God, how does that change the way we live?

⁹ I'm borrowing this brilliant phrase from Bruner, 534.