

A Sermon for DaySpring

by Eric Howell

The Joy of the Master

Matthew 25:14-30

November 15, 2020

The Gospel this Sunday is the Parable of the Talents. This passage tells of a man who, before setting off on a long journey, calls three servants and entrusts to them his assets in talents. Talents, *talantons*, were extremely valuable ancient coins.

The actions of the three servants from that point forward highlight how what you believe about the character of God says a lot about how you see yourself and how you live with the opportunities and challenges in front of you. For some people, what they believe about the character of God frees them to live in joy and trust even in the face of pretty daunting challenges. For others, what they believe about God's character immobilizes them in fear and worry even in the face of terrific opportunities. It is from that fear, rooted in misconception of God, that Jesus wants to set us free.

The master entrusts five talents to the first servant, two to the second, and one to the third. During the master's absence, the servants must earn a profit from this trust. The first and second servants do so. They each double the initial value of the capital. When the master returns, they are eager to share the news of their success. He says to them "Well done, good and faithful servants." He gives them increased responsibility and, I think this is sometimes overlooked, invites them to enter into "the joy of your master."

The desire to be good and to be faithful is near the heart of Christian discipleship. We want to be good, not bad in our actions toward God and toward our brothers and sisters; we want to be faithful, not unfaithful in our behaviors and actions. Healthy, growing disciples learn to walk with discipline on the path of goodness and faithfulness and avoid temptations to take detours on paths of evil, wickedness, and selfishness.

But some people seem to get really dark ideas of what God's call to holiness means. The Christian life for some people becomes an obstacle course testing their ability to be good at every turn under the watchful eye of an unhappy and vengeful god.

For some people, like the 3rd servant in the story I think, their understanding of God immobilizes them in fear. Fear of doing something wrong becomes their spirituality. That's the 3rd servant in this story, right? Totally immobilized. He is chosen from among many servants this rich master surely had, chosen for this great honor and responsibility. And he freezes. Completely. All he can think to do is dig a hole and bury this thing he's been given. It's a wonder he didn't get in the hole himself. I think he wanted to. I think a voice started playing in his head: "Things cannot possibly go well here; there is nothing I can do to do this well. I am a failure and I will fail at this too."

This sounds very grim and very dark, but I know--I know for sure--that the spirituality of many Christians is something like this. They live in fear of God, in very low esteem of their worthiness before Christ, and with the conviction that spiritual life is at best, not doing stuff wrong. The 3rd servant isn't an unknown stranger, this one who buries his treasure in the ground, immobilized in fear, with little capacity for trust, not to mention joy.

What's the difference then between him and the other 2 servants, the ones who were good and faithful and invited to enter the joy of their master. There's something more going on here than simply a story about people doing their jobs and doing them well. There's something beautiful here about living in the joy of the Lord and that joy being our strength. At stake is how we understand and experience God and what God invites us into at every turn. If the master represents God and the servants represent us, what might it mean to enter into the joy of the master? What might it mean to live with the joy of the Lord?

To accept a challenge before you not as a test but as invitation.

To understand that failure is a part of life that visits everyone, and it will not kill you.

To see yourself not as subjects to a harsh master, but as those with a calling to do what you do with some joy in your heart leading the way.

This makes all the difference in life: joy. Any amount of joy.

The joy of the Lord is confidence in God who loves you and knows you and cares for you. God who is on your side and sacrificed for you and is pursuing you with everything He has. God who wants the best for you and will do anything to bring you to his heart. Joy is knowing this when everything around you shouts that all is grim; all is lost and you are small and the problem is too big.

At a particularly challenging time, the people of Israel faced a fork in the road in their spirits. At just that decisive moment they are encouraged to lift their heads and go forward because: the joy of the Lord is your strength. Nehemiah 8. They needed to hear that. It was a dark time that would demand the very best and all the goodness each of them had to offer. They were rebuilding their city, their nation after a dark and dangerous time, and while they were hopeful, they were also worn out. They had come home from exile on a long, long journey only to find their city in ruins. They got to work, building, cleaning, restoring, rebuilding the structures of their lives and communities. And then they all gathered together to hear the priest Ezra read the Torah. For hours on end the scripture was read as the people listened to the ancient, almost forgotten word of God. And then, the people wept. It was too much. They bowed their faces to the ground and wept; their spirits burdened for who they had become, what they had lost, and for the immense challenge still in front of them. They felt the burden of God's word like an almost impossible weight to carry without failing.

Nehemiah saw their grief. And he said to them, "Hush. No more tears. This day is holy. Do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength."

The joy of the Lord is your strength. Good and faithful servants do not do what they do for fear of being bad or unfaithful. They do what they do from joy. The joy of their master is their strength to do all that is in front of them.

Can we receive that word today? The Lord inviting us to live in deepening joy, and in that joy, to find the strength we need for today and tomorrow and all that is in front of us. Joy leads to trust. Trust leads to courage. And courage sometimes leads to amazing things, even what seems impossible.

I want to close with a word of encouragement. You.

You're doing amazing these days.

You're facing and dealing with terrific challenges in life, both the normal kinds that happen all the time, and some pretty unusual challenges as well.

And you may not feel like you have any talents for the tasks at hand.

Yet, you're doing it. We may grab shovels from the shed on some days, but nobody is digging holes of self-pity around here for very long.

You're doing the best you can with what you've got, and you're doing it for your family and your children and your parents and your neighbors and your church and your colleagues and for the Lord.

And you're doing what you do with resilient joy.

I just want you to know today, and I hope you hear this:

More often than you realize, those beautiful words are being whispered over you by the one who keeps watch over you in the presence of the angels, cheering you on, the one who loves you and loves it when you live in joy even through your fears.

Those words, they are yours: *keep it up, well done, good and faithful servants.*

The joy of the Lord is and will evermore be your strength.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.