

Week 28  
March 29, 2009

## **A Question of Identity**

### **The Parable of the Talents**

*Matthew 25:14-30*

This parable is often cited when talking about stewardship and the importance of using the gifts that God has given us in His service. And there is an element of stewardship inherent in this parable. However, this parable really speaks to identity and relationship; to who Christ is and to who we are in Christ.

#### **Setting**

It is Passion Week, the week leading up to the crucifixion of Jesus. He has entered Jerusalem to huge crowds cheering him and welcoming him. During this week, he is in Jerusalem at the temple every day and returning each night to the Mount of Olives. In this week, he has overturned the money changers' table in the temple, challenging the powerful religious system. Each day in this last week of his life on earth, Jesus has been teaching in the temple and his teaching opposes the might and authority of the religious leaders. The crowds in the temple are amazed at his teaching. They have never heard anything like this before. The religious leaders try and keep trying to trap Jesus, but instead they are silenced by his teaching. Keith has been talking about the parables that reflect the Kingdom of Heaven—each of these parables is being used by Jesus to show that the religious leaders have a false view of God and that they are creating barriers between the people and God. And in Matthew 23:1, Jesus tells the crowds and his disciples that the teachers of the law and the Pharisees must be obeyed in what they say, but he tells them not to practice what they preach, for everything they do is for their own glory rather than God's. After this zinger delivered to the Pharisees, Jesus and his disciples return to the Mount of Olives. They are sitting on the Mount when Jesus tells them this parable. It is approximately two days before Jesus' final Passover when Jesus will be betrayed and crucified. He begins to warn his disciples about the end times. Jesus is telling them that the kingdom of heaven is here and he, the king, is speaking in parables to instruct them in how they are to act in his absence. In the parable of the talents, Jesus likens the kingdom of heaven to a man going on a long journey.

#### **The parable**

Three servants are entrusted with a great deal of money. A talent was a sum of money (not a coin) roughly equal to 6,000 denarius, and a denarius was an average day's pay for a worker. This means that the master gave one servant responsibility for 30,000 denarius. If the worker worked every day, seven days a week, without any holidays, that would have been the equivalent of over 82 years of wages. If the worker had observed the Sabbath and religious holidays, that sum is equivalent to 100 years of wages. And since Jesus is speaking to Jews who observed the Sabbath and religious holidays such as Passover, I think it's safe to assume the higher amount. The second servant was given responsibility for a sum equal to almost 40 years of wages and to the third servant responsibility for 20 years of wages. In

other words, the master has entrusted his servants with an amazing huge sum of money.

This parable is in the genre of the “example” story which provides an example of correct behavior, often shown in relation to behavior to avoid. In this parable we see two examples of how to behave, and one example to avoid. We see that two servants are told, “Well done, good and faithful servant!” But the third servant receives a very different response. The master says to him, “you wicked lazy servant!” and gives instructions that the servant should be thrown outside into the darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

This parable has disturbed people who are frightened by that view of God. We wonder what’s so wrong about just holding on to that money anyway? Can God really be trusted?

When we look more closely at this parable, we see that the master entrusts a large sum of money with three servants. Notice that we do not read any instructions from the master as to what the servants are to do with the money entrusted to them. According to the scripture, the master gives this money to them and then leaves. There are no instructions given, no speech telling them what they should do or risks to avoid. All three servants are treated the same at this point – the amount of money entrusted to them varies but all three are entrusted with a great deal of money with the same freedom to handle it.

The first difference I notice is the phrase “at once” in verse 16. It says, “the man who had received the five talents went at once and put his money to work and gained five more. So also, the one with the two talents gained two more.” Would you know what to do if you were suddenly entrusted with that kind of wealth? Would you have been thinking of where and how you could have invested that much money in order to double your money? And what kind of relationship does it imply to entrust some one else with that much money? But the man who was given one talent dug a hole and buried it in the ground. Can’t you just picture the furtiveness of this? I can see this servant slinking out at night, glancing over his shoulder to make sure he isn’t being observed, and digging a hole in the ground to hide that money. Now, it is true that burying money in the ground was a common practice to keep valuables safe – after all, there were no safe deposit boxes! But still -- what a contrast between the other two who went at once to put their master’s money to good use. Why did he act so differently from the other two?

When the master returns home, his response to the first two servants is exactly the same: He tells them, “Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful in a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master’s happiness.” But the third servant receives a different response. In fact, he is thrown out into the darkness, where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. Why did the master speak so harshly to him? What made the difference for him?

All three servants acted in accordance with their beliefs of the master. The actions of the first two servants show mutual respect and trust – there was a sense of reciprocity in their relationship with the master. The master had entrusted them with a very large sum of money and they were going to act in a way that would honor the trust the master showed in them.

But the third servant did not have this. He had fear and a belief that his master would do him wrong, a false image. In fact, when his master returns home after his long journey, this third servant says to the master, "I knew that you are a hard man, harvesting where you have not sown and gathering where you have not scattered seed." In other words, this servant accuses his master of stealing, of being dishonest in his business dealings. His actions were based in the false image of the master based on his false beliefs.

Christianity is very relational; it is a way of living that is based in relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ. If our understanding of God is skewed, our relationship with Him as well as others is harmed. What we do is born out of what we know and what we believe.

Beliefs, whether true or false, affect how we understand reality. False beliefs lead to false understandings, to seeing and understanding people and events in a false light, to believing false things about ourselves and about God. False understandings lead to misunderstandings, broken communication and relationships, broken promises, and false identity. We see ourselves and others through a polluted haze. When I was a little girl living in southern California, there would be smog alerts, which were marked by hazy air, reduced visibility, impaired breathing, and burning eyes. The smog meant that we couldn't see clearly. Even landmarks that we knew were there, were absent. Spiritually, beliefs that contradict God's description of Himself, his love for us, the hope of our eternal inheritance, his dreams and plans for us, his beloved children, are like smog. We lose our true identity and the life and work to which God created for us. Any belief that contradicts what God tells us about himself in Scripture and creation are lies promoted by the enemy. In this parable, the third servant was enslaved by a lie, a false view of his master. His false beliefs create a kind of moral smog in which he cannot accurately understand his master.

### **So, How Do We Know Who Christ Is?**

We can look at the descriptions that Jesus Himself gives to us:

- Jesus Christ gives grace and truth (John 1:17)
- Jesus Christ gives us living water (John 4:13-14)
- He is the bread of life (John 6:35)
- He has come that we may have life and have it abundantly. He is the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for us (John 10:10-11, 14)
- Jesus is the resurrection and the life (John 11:25)
- Jesus is the way and the truth and the life (John 14:6)
- Jesus is the true vine, His Father is the Gardener and we are the branches. If we abide in Him we will bear good fruit (John 15:1-5)
- Christ is the Passover Lamb, who has been sacrificed for us (I Cor. 5:7)
- The Lord Jesus is Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit (II Cor. 3:17-18)
- Christ is the image of God (II Cor. 4:4)
- In Christ, we have redemption, peace, joy and reconciliation (Rom 3:24; 5:1, 11)
- In Christ, we are heirs with God and joint-heirs with Christ (Rom 8:17)
- In Christ, we are loved: Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the

present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom 8:38-39)

### **Who are we in Christ?**

- We reflect the Lord's glory and are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit (II Cor. 3:17-18)
- In Christ, we are a new creation (II Cor. 5:17-19)
- We are called to be ambassadors for Christ (II Cor. 5:20)
- We have freedom in Christ; He has redeemed us from sin (Gal 2:4)
- We have been adopted by God as His beloved children (Gal 4:5)
- We have been blessed with every good blessing. We stand holy and blameless before God. We have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, which he lavished upon us (Eph 1:3-4)
- We are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them (Eph 2:10)

### **Jesus Entrusts Us with His Kingdom**

In this parable, Jesus is the master. He entrusts us with his kingdom. He gives to us with lavish abundance, really ridiculously abundant gifts, freely, without strings and conditions, trusting us to act in accordance to his will. Jesus has chosen to do in relationship with us what he could do alone.

Is it possible that your view of God may need to change in some area? Ask the Holy Spirit to show you where your view of God may need to be updated, or any places where a false view of God may need to be replaced with a more accurate view of God, our loving Father who longs to be in relationship with us.

Several months ago, in fact last November, Keith defined bad religion as this: talk without action; action without relationship; obedience without love. The third servant was about bad religion. He obeyed his master by just barely going through the motions; his actions did not accord with his master's wishes. His actions were not based in relationship. But the first and second servants acted with love rooted in the reality of their relationship. Their actions coincided with their talk; their actions reflected the context of a relationship based in trust; and they obeyed their master in love. Our response to God is always in answer to God. He is always reaching out to us, longing to be in relationship with us. Let's ask the Holy Spirit to draw us into the reality of our relationship with Jesus.

May the grace of God protect and sustain you, and may He bless you in every good way in this week to come.