

Victory Lutheran Church- Jacksonville, FL
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Worship Series: *The Time in Between*
Service Theme: *A Time for Faithful Service*
Sermon Theme: *Good and Faithful Servants*
November 19, 2023—Matthew 25:14-30

Personal confession time: I was not a very good and faithful student during my last few months of school at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. That's where the pastors in our church body go for their last four years of training before being called into full-time ministry. Don't get me wrong. I wasn't skipping classes or failing tests, but I definitely wasn't giving my whole heart, time, or attention to schoolwork anymore. And you can probably guess why. After eight years of school and hands-on training, I was just a few months away from graduating and finding out where I'd first serve as a pastor. My Master's thesis was finished. I was engaged to a cute Kindergarten teacher named Kelly. The end was in sight! Maybe you've felt that same struggle during your "senior slide," or working those final few days before vacation. Putting in a lot of hard work doesn't feel very desirable, important, or necessary when you're getting close to the finish line, looking forward to something better, or distracted by things that seem more important.

As Christians living in the Time in Between Jesus' first coming and his coming again at Judgment Day, we might be tempted to feel the same way about good and faithful service to Jesus. The signs are all around that Jesus could come back at any time. We learned last Sunday that when Jesus returns as Judge, he won't be tallying our good works to see if we've done enough to get into Heaven, but will judge the world based on our faith in him as Savior. Jesus already proclaimed, "It is finished." So putting in a lot of hard work to serve God might not feel very desirable, important, or necessary. It's pretty easy to get distracted by things that feel more important in our lives.

That's exactly why Jesus tells the parable we're focusing on this morning-- to show us what it looks like, and motivate us to be **Good and Faithful Servants** in this Time in Between!

Jesus teaches, "*Again, [the kingdom of heaven] will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted his wealth to them. To one he gave five bags of gold, to another two bags, and to another one bag, each according to his ability.*" These servants were living in "a time in between." Their master left on a journey, but at an unknown time, he would return. See the connection? God's the master in Jesus' parable, and we, his followers, are the servants!

While he was gone, the master entrusted his three servants with varying amounts of his wealth. Now, when you hear "bags of gold," don't picture a little coin purse. The Greek word translated "bag of gold" is *talent*, which in Jesus' time equated to about 6,000 days' wages for a common laborer. So one talent was about 20 years' wages! So even the one talent servant was entrusted with a huge amount!

God tells us that he, the Creator and possessor of all things, has done the same thing for us. He's entrusted us, his servants, with some of his limitless wealth. The "bags of gold" God has given to us aren't just financial blessings. Our money is part of it, but it also includes so much more! It includes our gifts, talents, and abilities. As Paul writes in our second reading from Romans, "*We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us.*" It includes all the other physical and spiritual resources God has given, as well as all the circumstances and responsibilities God has placed us into in our lives! Through the characters in Jesus' parable, we're reminded of the different ways we can live in relation to those gifts, and most importantly, how God wants us to.

"The man who had received five bags of gold went at once and put his money to work and gained five bags more. So also, the one with the two bags of gold gained two more. The man who had received one bag went off, dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money." Two of the servants immediately went to work, putting the master's wealth to good use and producing a profit with it. The third servant, however, did nothing, hiding his talent under the mattress, if you will. Which is a good snapshot of the ways people use the talents God has entrusted to them. Some are all in, faithfully using their gifts

from God to produce a good spiritual harvest. But others are content to just sit on these gifts, producing no good spiritual profit from them. Or, to use them for our own selfish desires rather than for God's purposes.

What Satan wants you to believe is that God doesn't really care what you do. After all, we're saved by faith in Jesus, not by our good works, so does it really matter if we do them? Jesus says that the finish line is near, so can't we just coast the rest of the way instead of pouring ourselves into faithful service? A lot of people assume that being a servant of God means just not doing "bad things." But the Master's reaction tells us everything we need to know about how God wants us to live as his servants in the time in between!

"After a long time the master of those servants returned and settled accounts with them. The man who had received five bags of gold brought the other five. 'Master,' he said, 'you entrusted me with five bags of gold. See, I have gained five more.'" The servant who had gained two more also came and reported the same to his master. Last, the talent-burying servant came and reported with a shoulder shrug, ***"I knew that you are a hard man...so I was afraid and went out and hid your gold in the ground. See, here is what belongs to you."***

The master's response to these three servants gives us a window into God's heart and will. To the two servants who faithfully put his wealth to use, the master heaps identical praise: ***"Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share in your master's happiness!"*** But the servant who did nothing with his talent rightly receives the master's wrath! ***"You wicked, lazy servant! You should have put my money on deposit with the bankers, so that when I returned I would have received it back with interest...Throw that worthless servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."***

Obviously from the master's response, being a follower of Jesus is more than just not doing "bad things." Our master, Jesus, also cares deeply about what we do with the gifts he's entrusted to us! So, we Christians need to ask ourselves, "Are you being a good and faithful

servant with the gifts God has entrusted to you? Or are you just burying them?" The master's response also gives us some key factors of what it means to be good and faithful servants in the time in between.

First, being a good and faithful servant isn't about amounts. Neither the amount of talents you've received, nor the amount of profit you produce with those talents! One servant received 5 bags of gold, another received 2 bags, and the third received one. And yet, the master expected faithfulness from all of them. We quickly make excuses for our lack of faithfulness, pointing out a perceived scarcity of talents, time, or treasures we've received. Or, pointing to the many gifts and resources others have received, insinuating, "Of course they serve faithfully! God gave them so much more than me!" But the master doesn't give the one talent servant a pass for his lack of faithfulness because the other servants received more. However many "bags of gold" we've received--and no one can say God hasn't given them any--God expects us to be good and faithful servants with what we've been given!

Faithfulness also isn't measured by the amount of "profit" the servants produce. The first servant more than doubled the total profits of the second servant. And yet, the master praises and rewards both in the exact same way! ***"Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!"*** The amount didn't matter to the master as much as faithfulness did—that they did something with their talents! Faithfulness isn't just going through the motions to check a box off a list, and it's certainly not doing nothing. To be a good and faithful servant simply means to faithfully use what God has entrusted to you with a desire to accomplish good, master-pleasing purposes with it!

Which brings up an important question. Why does the master entrust his wealth to his servants? Why not to a banker, or an investor? And in the same vein, why does God entrust his wealth to sinners like us? Some might mischaracterize God, like the third servant does his

master—assuming God entrusts us with these gifts because he’s a hard, cold slave driver who wants to squeeze every last drop he can out of us and force us to do his laborious bidding. If that’s how we view God and his purpose in giving us these gifts, then we probably also will be motivated to do nothing with our talents, or view faithful service to God as something undesirable, unimportant, or unnecessary.

But that can’t be the master’s motivation, because he doesn’t reward the servant who produced a bigger profit in a better way. Which means God doesn’t entrust us with these talents and call us to be good and faithful servants so he can get everything he can out of us. But so that he can give everything he can to us! Notice, the master tells his servants not, “Come and give me what you’ve earned for me,” but ***“Come and share in your master’s happiness!”***

If someone gifted you a packet of seeds, they want you to plant them, not toss them in your junk drawer. And they want you to plant them not to force you into some backbreaking, time-consuming labor, but so you can enjoy delicious vegetables, beautiful flowers, or the joy of gardening.

Likewise, God gives us our talents, resources, and circumstances because he wants us to do something with them! Not so he can be our slave driver, but so we can share in his happiness! Because everyone’s looking for something that will give their life meaning and purpose, right? Whether it’s a career, a degree, a relationship, or an achievement, everyone’s searching for whatever will help them feel like their life has meaning and purpose.

What greater meaning and purpose can we have than living our lives as good and faithful servants for God, so that through our faithful use of the gifts God has given us, more and more people can spend eternity in Heaven! There is no other purpose or meaning, no other way to use your “bags of gold,” that will have an eternal impact! So again, we have to ask ourselves, “Am I using the gifts God has given as a good and faithful servant? Or am I hiding them underground?” Am I all-in? Or half-hearted?

And the beautiful thing is, we’re not good and faithful servants only when we serve in the four walls of church. Certainly, the day-to-day ministry of the church is a huge opportunity God has established to use his gifts for that all-important purpose. So, brothers and sisters in Christ, good and faithful servants that you are, if you haven’t found a way to serve in God’s church, reach out to me, and let’s talk about opportunities to get you plugged into faithful Gospel ministry and service at Victory!

But you’re also being a good and faithful servant when you faithfully parent your children, especially to know Jesus; when you faithfully care for your sick spouse; when you faithfully serve to protect our country; when you faithfully work to glorify God at your work, whether you’re an electrician, dietitian, or magician. A helpful evaluation and application tool is to ask yourself at the beginning of each day, based on the circumstances and opportunities you find yourself in, “How can I be a faithful servant today?” Whatever “bags of gold” God has given, how can you use them to serve him today?

Because that’s what he’s done for you! The master and owner of all things humbled himself and became a servant, so that he could serve and save you! He became a faithful servant, so that he could forgive us for all the times we’ve failed to be good and faithful servants of God. As Paul writes in Romans, ***“I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God.”***

Motivated by God’s mercy in Christ, let’s offer our lives as living sacrifices to God! It will be so completely worth it, when Jesus comes again, and we get to hear the voice of our master, who has saved us by his grace, as he proclaims, ***“Well done, good and faithful servant!”*** And invites, ***“Come and share your master’s happiness.”***