

The world doesn't just skip over Advent; it also skips over these Sundays in November, as if they do not exist. Christmas is in the stores. It's on the radio already, and on television. The world does not mind so much celebrating Jesus' birth, but it wants no part of His return on the Last Day. Forget Matthew 25. Let's keep the Bible open to Luke 2. Luke 2 is tied to the beginning of the Church Year. Matthew 25 closes the year for us. But the world does not want it to end, for it does not want to hear about the theme of these Sundays in November: wise and foolish virgins, the settling of accounts, the separating of sheep and goats. These parables make people nervous. They might even strike fear in the hearts of some. No, better to jump over all these to the happy story of Christmas where the theme is joy and "fear not."

The irony is that the parable before us today, as with last Sunday's parable of the Ten Virgins, is not even intended for the world. That comes next Sunday with the sheep and the goats parable. The three servants in today's parable represent church people, not the people outside the church. The man "*going on a journey*," who is Jesus, does not cast His pearls before swine, but gives them to the baptized; those who serve Him in His kingdom. These pearls are the talents in the parable and are of infinite value. They are the treasures of the Kingdom of Grace, the very Gospel itself.

With His parable, Jesus teaches us what we need to know before He returns. Do not jump ahead to Christmas. Stay here in Matthew 25. Not to make you nervous. Not to strike fear in your heart. To prepare you for the end. To "*examine yourselves*," writes St. Paul, "*to see whether you are in the faith*." And if not, to be drawn back to Christ so that, in the end, you will "*enter into the joy of your Master*."

You are one of the servants in this parable, as am I. We received from Jesus in our baptism one, two, or five talents. We were given the Gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ for our salvation. We were given faith to believe this good news, and the resources to act upon it. What makes a good and faithful servant is not how much he is given, but whether he is faithful with what he is given.

Now I do not want to conclude this sermon focusing on the worthless servant, so let's deal with him now. Oh, he is pretty easy to spot, isn't he? The church member who does diddly squat. Who never makes so much as a dent in his checking account to support his own congregation. And who always has a good excuse.

Pretty worthless, right? And pretty obvious. Or maybe not. Those whom we think are the worthless servant may be struggling with things in life of which we are unaware. They may have a good reason for doing and giving little to nothing right now. Besides this, they are not going to change from worthless to faithful servants by our judging them. They need our love and prayers. They may need a listening ear. If someone is such a servant, her or she will be told that they are worthless in the end. They do not need to hear that now. Instead, they need to hear the Gospel again and again which does change us. They need to hear not how worthless they are, but that Jesus counts them of such value and worth that He gave His life for them on the cross. And besides all this, if I am always looking at the worthless servants around me, I will have a hard time seeing the worthless servant who lives in my own heart.

The comfort of the Gospel is this, that Jesus became the worthless servant on our behalf. All our wickedness, slothfulness, and worthlessness was laid upon Him. And He Himself was cast away from God "*into the outer darkness*" in our place.

This powerful and assuring word works in us to make us good and faithful servants. The only way that this talent, this Gospel of the kingdom, will not work in us is if, like the wicked servant, we bury it away from ourselves. God's Word succeeds. "*It does not return to Me empty,*" He promises, "*but accomplishes what I desire.*"

We see this success in the first two servants. The one made five talents more and the other two talents more, not because they were industrious and clever, but because when the good news of Jesus is not buried in the ground away from us, it produces great things within and through us.

You do not need to wait for Christmas to have real joy. The first two servants had this joy as they used the talents they were given. A little Greek word in the text tells this to us. Upon the return of their master, each said, "*Here, I have made five/two talents more!*" That word for *here* in the Greek is a word which expresses joyful excitement.

What a joy it is to see the Word of the Lord grow. To witness a baptism is to have this joy. Hearing the good news of Jesus and sharing it is pure joy. We speak of the joy we will have in heaven. But this parable teaches us that we have joy now as we use the talents entrusted to us. And in the end, it is Jesus who has joy. "*Enter,*" He says, "*into the joy of your Master!*" As joyful as it will be for us on that day, our God will have even more joy in bringing us with Him into our heavenly home.

You also do not need to wait until Christmas to hear the words, "*fear not.*" It is the servant who buried his talent in the ground who admits he was afraid. No wonder he did not put his master's talent to work. He was afraid of his master. But the first two servants were not.

Jesus gives His parable to you not to make you afraid, but to give you assurance. As good and faithful servants, you do not have a faith that is dead as the worthless servant did, but a true and living faith. This is why you do not bury the Word and Sacraments away from yourself, but gladly hear and receive them. And so these holy treasures are at work in you who believe.

Now one thing we need to know about the first two servants. It looks to us as if life for them was always wonderful. They were not afraid. They had joy. They gave their all into making use of the talents they were given. It seems as if it was only the third servant who struggled with all these things.

The truth is, though, that there are days when we hardly feel like good and faithful servants. There are days, even many of them, in which the wicked servant takes over and we feel pretty worthless. Life is not always perfect for good and faithful servants. In fact, it is never perfect but always a struggle.

However, you will hear from Jesus' mouth, "*Well done, good and faithful servant,*" because these very words are yours now in your baptism. You do not become good and faithful; you are declared to be good and faithful servants because you are in Christ who is the one and only good and faithful Servant.

Good and faithful servants are worthless servants, but who are forgiven. And this is you. There is no wickedness, no slothfulness, no worthlessness in your life that is not forgiven. Jesus took it all from you. He took it from all of you. Everyone of you is forgiven. Because He declares that you are His good and faithful servant, you are empowered to use the talents He has given you. And when the day comes, He will say to you, "*Enter into the joy of your Master!*" Amen.