

**Matthew 25:14-30**

Every November when the autumn winds blow and remind us that winter is just around the corner, we are also reminded by the appointed Scripture readings that around the corner, there waits as well, the Last Day. The trees are mostly bare; the days are getting shorter; people recognize the signs and prepare themselves for the coming of winter. They check their tires, furnaces, and pantries, and pull their gloves and overcoats out of storage. In a sense this is also what we do within the church. In these last Sundays of the Church Year we recognize the signs of Christ's second coming, and we prepare ourselves for the end. If you knew that a thief was going to break into your house tonight, you would be watchful and not be caught unprepared. And so it is with the coming of Christ. Because He could return at any time, we do not want to be unprepared for the Day of Judgment.

Every one of us in this room is one of those three servants in Jesus' parable. He has entrusted to us His possessions. He has gone "on a journey," but He is coming back. And when Jesus returns He will, as the parable says, "settle accounts" with you and me. How will it go on that day? Will it go well for all? Will many be surprised by what they will hear? Or is it anybody's guess? Jesus gives us this parable today so that we will not be unprepared for tomorrow. As wise virgins and not foolish, therefore, let us pay attention to Jesus' words.

On the surface it might seem as though this parable teaches us that God rewards the ambitious and punishes the lazy. "Well done, good and faithful servant" was said to the two who had increased their talents. But, "You wicked and slothful servant!" was spoken in disgust to the one who buried his talent in the ground. But if the parable teaches such a thing, then it would be teaching that you can work your way into heaven. Ambition, hard work, using the abilities God has given you will bring words of praise from Jesus on the Last Day... Friends, if this is the meaning of Jesus' parable, then you should not be here in church this morning—you should be out there working. If ambition and hard work gains the reward of heaven, then we have no need of the Word of God, and His Sacraments, and faith, and Christ Crucified. We should stop having worship services and start having sausage dinners every week if this parable teaches that God rewards those who are ambitious.

It does not teach that. All of Jesus' parables in Matthew 25 have to do with the Word of God. With the Ten Virgins, the oil for their lamps is the Word. With the Sheep and the Goats, the least of Jesus' brothers are those who proclaim the Word. And today, the talents given to the three servants are that same Word of God. In baptism you and I became these servants of Christ. We were given, then and there, the talents in the parable: God's Word, along with faith, and the Holy Supper, and Christ Crucified.

It's not that some of us received more of Christ in our baptism, and others of us received less of Him. We all are given the same Christ, the same blessings of salvation, the same Faith, and hope, and eternal life. The servant in the parable who was given one talent received the same thing as the servant who was given five talents. The difference is that some Christians are given more responsibility than others. A little baptized child in the pew has the same Word of God as the Elders in the congregation have, but the Elders have much more responsibility toward that Word than the little child has. A mother and daughter share the same Faith, but the mother has the responsibility to teach the Word to her daughter. The

mother has been given more “talents” than her daughter. The Elders, more “talents” than the little child in the pew.

But all three servants in the parable were given the same Word, the same Faith, the same salvation and life in Christ. The words, “Well done, good and faithful servant,” were spoken to two of the servants in the parable not because of what they did with the Word of God, but because of what God’s Word did with them. As soon as they received their talents they, at once, put “it” to work. But as with seed in the ground, the growth comes not from the farmer, but from within the seed itself. Although these servants used the Word, it was the Word itself causing the growth.

And we see that happening here. Some of you have been given two or five talents by God. In your baptism you were given Christ and His Word, and as an Elder, or a teacher, or a church musician, or a leader in the congregation, or a Christian parent, God has also given you great responsibility along with giving you His Word. On the Last Day, Jesus will commend you and reward you, “Well done, good and faithful servant,” not because you worked hard with His Word, but because His Word worked within you.

To God alone be the glory! Your faith and hope of life eternal in Christ; your hard work within the church; your leading by example, is what God’s Word did in you and through you. The “good and faithful servant” is not you—it is Christ in you. He alone is good and faithful. He is at work in your heart and life. Christ is the One who causes the growth of the talents. And yet, you receive the reward. It’s like the ballplayer who sits on the bench for every game, and yet when his team wins the championship he, along with them, receives a Superbowl ring. Christ does all the work, but you receive the reward.

Even if you only received one talent from God, you have the same Christ in you, the same Faith, and salvation, and Word of Life as every other believer. And though you may not have great responsibility, you are in the right place—you are at the bank. What you received in your baptism is growing because here at the bank God causes growth. It may not seem like much—less than one percent perhaps; but it’s growth from God. You are here at the bank because you know how valuable God’s Word is. You don’t bury it in the ground; you come to the bank where God’s promise is to give growth to what He has given you. And so your faith will not be shameful to God on the Day of Judgment. For though you did not work hard with the Word, God’s Word kept working in you causing growth pleasing to Him as you came to the bank Sunday, after Sunday, after Sunday.

Now Jesus gives us a warning in this parable. There are Christians, baptized and given God’s Word along with faith and salvation in Christ, who will be cast out of heaven into the outer darkness on the Day of Judgment. But it’s not because they were lazy. It’s not because they did not work hard with God’s Word. It’s because they buried God’s Word apart from their life. The worthless servant was given a talent. He received the same Word and faith in Christ as the other servants. But he saw no value in what he had. He didn’t have the desire to put his talent to work. He saw no reason to put it in the bank. He buried it out of sight as something which meant nothing to him.

That is our temptation today. Satan does not want us to put God’s Word to use in our life. He does not want us to teach it to others; to witness to neighbors with it; or even to let it cause growth within us by coming here to the bank week after week. Satan would have us

bury God's Word with our busy life. He would have us, at the end of each day say, "I'm too tired now to read God's Word," and at the start of each week say, "I'm too busy now to go to church and hear it." But when we give in to Satan's temptation, we are that third servant in the parable. He may have been a fine, upstanding citizen, but the Word of Life and Christ's Sacraments were not in his life. He had buried them in the ground. On the Day of Judgment, Christ cast him into the outer darkness.

Friend, do not live as that servant did. Put the highest value on God's Word and Sacraments. Keep them not buried away from your life, but front and center in your life. And when we're tempted to live as that wicked servant, remember that you are precious to your God. He chose to give His Son for you. In baptism He gave you life and salvation in Christ. In His Word and Sacraments He keeps you with Christ. Why would you keep these gifts away from your life? They are for you. Jesus loved you by entering into the outer darkness in your place. He faced the judgment we deserve for our sins so that on Judgment Day you will not be judged but declared holy and righteous. Jesus endured the weeping and gnashing of teeth on the cross for you, and now you are declared forgiven. Even if you have buried Christ away from your life, He lives and is here today in Word and Sacrament for you. He forgives you. Even if you have buried God's Word beneath an immoral life, He today forgives you. Here in His Word is strength to live in Christ.

You may not have five talents, or even two; but we all have at least one talent—you have Christ, you have His Word in your ears, you have His flesh and blood for your salvation. So whether you work hard with God's Word having great responsibility, or whether you just come here to the bank faithfully, you are because of God's Word at work in you, and because of Christ for you, and in you, "good and faithful servants." Amen.