

Introduction:

A Mother's Personal Faithfulness

The USS Astoria was the first U.S. cruiser to engage the Japanese fleet during the battle of Savo Island (in the Solomon Islands off northwest shore of Guadalcanal) on August 8th – 9th, 1942. About 2 o'clock a.m. signalman 3rd class Elgin Staples was swept overboard when one of the Astoria's gun turrets exploded. Though wounded in both legs by shrapnel and in severe shock, Staples was kept afloat by a narrow lifebelt that he somehow managed to activate. Around 6 o'clock a.m. Staples was rescued by a passing American destroyer and returned safely to the Astoria.

By 12 noon however the Astoria was badly damaged and sank. Staples, still wearing the same lifebelt, found himself floating in the water once again. Eventually he was picked up by the USS President Jackson along with 500 other survivors of the battle and evacuated to safety on a transport to Nouméa.

Once safely on board the transport Staples began examining the lifebelt that had served him so well on two occasions. Staples noticed two things: one -it had been manufactured by the Firestone Tire and Rubber Company, Akron, OH; and two – he also noticed that stamped on the lifebelt was a registration number.

In time Staples was allowed to return home on a brief leave. He told his harrowing story to his mother, who as it turns out, worked for Firestone and asked her the purpose of the number on the belt. Staple's mother told her son that the company insisted on personal responsibility for the war effort, and that each lifebelt bore its own unique number – a number assigned by only one inspector.

Staples who had memorized the code quoted the number to his mom. It was his mother's own personal code that she affixed to each and every lifebelt she had inspected and approved.¹

Elgin Staples own mother had been faithful in what at the time was seemingly a small matter. She had proven herself worthy of the trust that had been placed in her by her employer. And her faithfulness – her trustworthiness – resulted in nothing short of the saving of her very own son's life. For which he was eternally grateful.

Important Questions For The New Year

Typically as we begin what we call a New Year our focus is on things such as New Year's resolutions and the like. We talk of new hopes, new dreams, and new aspirations for the future. Even the majority of articles in our local newspaper this past week recapped key events of 2011 – and how 2012 might be better, improved, or at least different.

This parable however, turns our attention and focus in an entirely different direction by raising a far more important set of questions / issues this first Sunday of the New Year. Questions such as: What will my life have counted for this time next year? Will my life have produced or resulted in anything of lasting value or true importance? What am I going to do in 2012 with the time, talents, and treasures God has entrusted to me – invested in me?

¹ Commander Eric J. Berryman, "Strange Things Happen At Sea". Proceedings, U.S. Naval Institute June 1989, Vol. 115/6/1036; p. 48.

What changes am I willing to make in the coming year so that (Lord willing) my life will have made a positive difference in this fallen world for Christ? Changes made so that I am found to be a more faithful follower of Christ. So that God considers me to have been trustworthy with what He has entrusted to me. So that when I stand face to face with God I will hear Him say “Well done good and faithful servant (Mt. 25:21).”

For that to happen we will need to come to grips with two fundamental truths found in this parable of Jesus. First, God has made (and is making) an enormous investment in your life and mine. And second, God expects a return on His investment in your life.

I. GOD HAS MADE AN ENORMOUS INVESTMENT IN YOUR LIFE (v. 14-18)

A. He Has Entrusted To Each And Every One Of Us Something Of Great Value Belonging To Him.

He gives ample time, talents, and treasures to all His servants.

I'm Leaving On A Jet Plane – Don't Know When I'll Be Back Again

This parable, which is part of a series dealing with the need to be prepared for Jesus' second coming, begins when a certain master sets up individual bank accounts with his servants before he leaves on a very long journey. He entrusts to each and every servant at least one – and in most cases many talents.

Here is a man who is obviously very wealthy by any standard. He is the lord, master, owner, president and CEO of a large conglomerate. And he is about to leave on a very long trip – a journey that will necessitate his absence for a very long time. In fact, as it turns out he will be gone longer than anyone could have anticipated.

So (v.14) before he leaves the master calls all his servants together. Not merely to say goodbye (although that was most certainly true), but to bestow upon each of them a great honor – the opportunity of a life time.

As the owner of the company he obviously doesn't want his money and capital to lie idle during his absence. He doesn't want the business to shut down, the fields to lie fallow. Like any good businessman he wants his assets, investments in circulation so that he can continue both to produce a product and make a profit as well.

So (v.15) he gathers his workers together, gives assignments to each of them, as well as instructions on what he expects of them while he is away. And to make it possible for them to fulfill their assigned tasks the master distributes to each servant a 'talent' or in most cases several 'talents'

Joseph And Potiphar (Genesis 39)

This situation is not unlike that which Joseph faced in Genesis 39. As you may remember Potiphar put Joseph in charge over his entire estate and household affairs. He entrusted into Joseph's care everything he owned, which then freed Potiphar from concerning himself with the daily affairs at home and allowed him to better attend to other matters on Pharaoh's behalf.

What Everyone In The Room Understands

Of course what everyone listening to Jesus understands is that along with any such great privilege and opportunity there is also a corresponding responsibility of the servant's part to manage his master's affairs well. Every servant knows he is expected to be productive in the master's absence.

And while they don't know the day or the hour of the master's return – they do know that when he does there will be an audit, an evaluation or performance review if you will.

How Much Is That Talent In The Window?

Now in order to feel the weight of what Jesus is saying, it is important that we understand not only what a talent is, but also its worth. While we tend to think of a talent in terms of minted coins or bars of gold bullion, a talent in the ancient world was not necessarily a coin. Often it referred to a measure of weight or a commodity with a certain value attached to it.

A good example might be the jar of pure nard, an expensive perfume that Mary poured on Jesus' feet (Jn. 12:1-8). The value of the perfume was not merely its cost but what the perfume represented. That is why in part Judas was so upset with Mary, because as he himself pointed out, the jar and perfume could have been sold for more than a year's wages. Ask yourself would you be willing to spend an entire year's wages on a bottle of expensive perfume? (Let alone pour it on someone's feet.) Again, it is not the commodity itself but the great value attached to it.

Today's equivalent might be a person's financial portfolio containing things such as stocks, bonds, annuities, mutual funds, or a 401k personal retirement fund.

The Man Who Thought He Had Just Won The Lotto

Years ago on a mission trip to India our team spent the first night in a nice hotel, getting some long overdue relief from jetlag . A young man accompanied me to my room, opened the door, turned on the lights, and helped me get settled. Before he left I reached into my pocket and realized that I had forgotten to go to the currency exchange before leaving the airport in Delhi.

So I gave him a \$1 dollar bill, which may not seem like much until you realize that the exchange rate for one U.S. dollar at the time was 30 Rupees –and more importantly – 30 Rupees represented one month's entire salary for that man. The young man looked at the bill and began to thank me profusely. I looked at that dollar bill and thought I had only given him a 'buck'. He looked at the same bill and thought he had one the Lotto. Again, it was not the commodity itself (in this case a piece of currency), but the great value attached to it. Needless to say I soon had other employees knocking on my door inquiring if I needed 'anything' at all.

The Value Of A Talent In Jesus' Day

If your Bible is like mine, there probably is a note on the bottom of the page indicating that a talent was roughly equal to a thousand dollars. Actually a talent was worth far more than a thousand dollars. It represented something like a thousand dollars of buying power in the first century. In today's dollars a talent's value was approximately equal to 15-20 years of wages. Or to put it another way a talent would today represent about \$250,000 worth of seed money to these servants.

So you can see that even the servant who "only" received one talent, in reality was entrusted with an enormous amount. Especially in terms of a talent's potential and what could be achieved, accomplished, or produced with it. For the longer the master remains away the greater the potential for making an even greater profit. And in this case their master was gone a very, very, long time.

The Cattle On A Thousand Hills Are Mine (Ps. 50:10)

It is also clear that the master is not being stingy with any of his servants. He has entrusted an enormous amount to each and every one of them. In fact it is staggering to try and get your arms around just how gracious and generous this master really is with his wealth and resources. How much more so then for the God who owns the cattle on a thousand hills – not to mention the world and all that is in it.

Little wonder then that Paul exclaims, “*Now unto Him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be the glory...*” (Eph. 3:20).

The Only Unanswered Question

So the only unanswered question when the master returns is what the servants have done with the time, the talents, and the treasures with which they were entrusted? Whether or not the servants will be found faithful and considered trustworthy by their master?

Recap:

I. GOD HAS MADE AN ENORMOUS INVESTMENT IN YOUR LIFE (14-18)

A. He Gives Talents To All His Servants In Accordance With His Unbelievable Generosity

B. He Also Gives Talents In Accordance With Each Person’s Abilities

Our Exceedingly Wise God

God, our Lord and Master is not only very wealthy and extremely generous, but His is also exceedingly wise. He knows that His servants do not all have equal skills and abilities and capacities for handling his resources. He did not create us to be cookie cutter Christians. Your talents are not mine nor mine yours. So based upon God’s knowledge and insight into each of us, He distributes varying amounts accordingly.

That truth is important to remember because what may seem to you or me on the surface as unfair or unequal treatment is neither. God’s distribution of talents is not evidence of His unfairness or preferential treatment toward some and not others. But rather it is a sign of His wisdom and love. For He gives an amount appropriate to each of us. He gives in accordance with what he knows each of us can handle, our capacity if you will. He gives in accordance with His will, goals, objectives, and purposes – not necessarily ours.

What Is Given vs. What Is Not Given

The master’s wisdom is also seen not only in what *is* given, but in what *is not* given as well. He doesn’t give five talents to a person who has the ability to handle only one (and vice versa). He doesn’t expect more of us than we can possibly handle; to do so not only overburdens the servant, but also ensures that the end result will be disastrous – both for the master as well as the servant.

On the other hand, why give only one talent to someone who has been created with the capacity to handle more?

Recap

Remember, God’s talents are given in accordance with His unbelievable generosity and wisdom. They are given in accordance with each person’s abilities – not our inabilities. And God’s talents are also given as a trust.

C. God's Talents Are Given As A Trust

Twice in this passage the faithful servants themselves acknowledge that their master had “entrusted” them with certain talents (v. 20, 22). They clearly understood their talents never belonged to them – always to their master. Nor for that matter did the faithful servants view the talents as something they were entitled to or somehow deserved. It was something entrusted into their hands – and not merely for safe keeping. As such each talent was to be put to good use on behalf of their master.

The faithful servants also understood that a trust implies certain obligations or responsibilities on their part. Each servant was entrusted with a portion of his master's wealth and goods – capital if you will. All understood they were to use or invest his talents with the master's best interests in mind – in accordance with the master's wishes, desires, or will. Bottom line: God's talents are given as a trust.

We Give Thee But Thine Own

There is a doxology we used to sing in the church I served before coming here to Cornerstone that reflects and reinforces this idea that all of life is a gift entrusted to us by Christ Himself.

“We give Thee but Thine own, whatever the gift may be. All that we have is Thine alone, A trust O Lord from Thee.”

God's Non-negotiable, Bedrock Expectation

The master entrusted to each and every one of his servants at least one talent – and in most cases several. And he did so with one fundamental expectation. He expected that all his servants would get to work by investing the resources entrusted to them – to use them profitably in accordance with his will – his desires – so that his priorities would be advanced.

It is no different for us in 2012. All of life is a trust – yours as well as mine. Life is something that God entrusts to each of us. The only question is whether or not we prove to be trustworthy? Whether or not we prove to be worthy of God's trust? Whether or not we will use the time, talents, and treasures God has entrusted to us in such a way that our lives prove profitable / worthwhile to Him?

Put another way: “God's talents are His gifts to you. Your use of those talents is your gift to Him.”

So How Did They Do?

And that brings us to the question just how well did they do?

Having placed his talents into his servant's hands, the master now expects all his servants to put their talents to work. Likewise, God our Lord, our Master expects that we as His servants will put His talents to good use.

D. God Expects His Servants To Put His Talents To Good Use (16-18)

Again, how did the master's servants do? What did they do with what they were given? Did they live up to that which was entrusted to them? Well, yes – and no. Some were faithful and some were not. Some were commended and some unfortunately were condemned.

Those Who Were Faithful

Some used the time and invested the master's talents / treasures wisely. Some recognized they had been entrusted with a great deal. Some remembered that their master would return as promised some day from his journey. Some responded immediately in light of the fact that there was a day of accounting coming once the master arrived.

In fact two of the servants are noted in a positive light, specifically because they didn't waste any time, took what they had been given and used it wisely. Notice (v.16) Jesus says they "went at once". They didn't waste their gracious opportunity to do something significant for their master.

And as a result these particular servants were extremely productive with what had been entrusted to them. In fact, the two cited made 100% profit. They doubled the value of what they originally started with.

Those Who Were Not

By stark contrast there were others who did nothing – absolutely nothing with what they were given. Some servants invested nothing – none of the time, talents, treasures, and opportunity afforded them. They didn't carry out the task to which they had been assigned him by their master. Instead of putting their master's talents to work some pulled everything out of circulation entirely. Some hid their master's resources – supposedly to protect it. We might say, they hid it in a mattress for safe keeping.

Common Cultural Practice Of The Day

Now in Jesus' day to bury money in the ground was not all that unusual. Armies invaded Israel many times over the centuries. There were no banks we understand the word today. The word translated 'bank' most likely refers to money changers who charged a fee for their services. And homes were unsafe from burglars as well. Jesus hints at that reality when he said, "*Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth... where thieves break in and steal*" (Mt. 6:19-20).

So it was not all that unusual for a person to try and protect themselves from financial loss by burying the money in the ground.

Of course the problem with that strategy is as they say "Nothing ventured – nothing gained." If you invest nothing – your life will produce nothing of value either – in this world or the next. If you don't invest your life for eternity's sake your life won't reap anything worthwhile for eternity either.

The old saying may be old – but it is still true. "*Only one life and soon will be past. Only what's done for Christ will last.*"

The Bottom Line

Some servants did a great deal on behalf of their master. Others wasted both their master's resources as well as their day of opportunity – and foolishly so. For the lazy servant not only dug a hole for his master's money – but one for himself as well. For by his actions, the lazy servant reveals his true attitude, his genuine feelings toward both the gift and the giver.

Why Do You Call Me Lord, Lord?

There are so many today who call Jesus their Lord, their Master – but who unfortunately are spending what they believe to be their time, their talents, their treasures. Who continue investing their lives only on their own priorities, their own interests, their own desires.

And in the process we just don't seem to realize or believe that we are wasting our day of opportunity, our day of grace. I fear that we don't seem to grasp that Jesus evaluates the faith that we so glibly profess to possess by our faithfulness. By how faithful we are in small matters. By how trustworthy we are with that which He has entrusted to us.

Winston Churchill

The legendary Winston Churchill summed up the problem well when he said, *“To every man there comes in his lifetime that special moment when he is figuratively tapped on the shoulder and offered the chance to do a very special thing, unique to him and fitted to his talent; what a tragedy if that moment finds him unprepared for the work which would have been his finest hour.”*

The Settling Of The Accounts

So what happened when the master returned? Well, the first order of business was to settle the master's accounts with his servants. He set up the accounts before he left. He now settles the accounts upon his return (v.19).

The Second Major Truth Now Unfolds

And that brings us to Jesus' second critical truth contained in this parable. Namely this, not only has God made an enormous investment in your life and mine – but – God also expects a return on his investment.

II. GOD EXPECTS A RETURN ON HIS INVESTMENT IN YOUR LIFE (19-30)

Surprise, surprise, surprise

After a very long time the master unexpectedly shows up at the office one morning (v.19). As with the rest of Jesus' parables in this section of Matthew's gospel, the unstated implication is that the master's return was delayed much longer than anyone could have imagined or anticipated.

Which by the way the master's long delay not only gave more than enough time for his good servants to demonstrate their faithfulness, it also gave more than ample time for the lazy servants to repent and change the course of their lives as well. That is, if they really wanted to. But unfortunately for them – they didn't.

A Long Overdue Performance Review

What does the master do at this point? Well the first thing the master does is get his bookkeeper / accountant and calls everyone, one by one, into his office. He looks at the profit / loss financial reports for the company during the time of his absence. And he begins to settle all the outstanding accounts of his servants. He conducts a long overdue performance review if you will.

And as he does – one of two things happen: He commends those servants who were found faithful (v. 19-23), and he condemns those servants who were not (v. 24-30).

Double Your Talents Double Your Fun

Some during their performance review come in with their heads held high (v.20), for they bring their master a praise report of the status of the funds / resources entrusted to them. They have managed the resources their master had entrusted to them well.

Notice that both the servant entrusted with five talents and the servant entrusted with two talents bring in a good financial report to their boss. Their profit / loss sheets are in the black. They have used their time and talents wisely and doubled their master's investment in them. Their lives have produced something valuable with the talents and opportunities entrusted to them.

They both have proven themselves to be faithful. They both have been found to be trustworthy. And as a result both servants have now become even more useful to their master.

Notice as well their gratitude. Each of these servants gives all the credit, all the praise, and all the thanks to their master. They are grateful for the opportunity and the abilities he has given and entrusted to them. And each gratefully offers both the original capital as well as the gains back to their master.

Around The Throne In Heaven

This scene is not unlike that recorded in the book of Revelation where the twenty-four elders fall down before the throne of God and worship Him. And as part of their worship they lay their crowns at God's feet and say, *"You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being"* (Rev. 4:10-11),

In Scripture crowns often symbolize or represent the honors and blessings that God bestows upon his servants. The elders in John's vision take the crowns – the honors and blessings received from God's hand - and they offer back those same crowns at His feet in worship with great thanksgiving.

Praise God From Whom All Blessing Flow

In some small way that is what our bringing an offering in worship is all about. We are offering the fruit of our lives back to Him – the 'first-fruits' of what He has produced in us and through our lives. We bring an offering as a way of saying thanks. "Praise God from whom all blessing flow", we sing.

So why would followers of Jesus take the honors, the blessings bestowed upon them, and gladly, willingly offer them back to Jesus, their Lord, their Master, their Savior?

Because every genuine servant / follower of Jesus understands that in order for us to receive and benefit from the blessings of His kingdom it was necessary for the sinless Christ to become sin for us. We give out of sheer gratitude because Jesus laid aside His own crown of glory and honor and put on a crown of thorns – for us.

On this first Sunday of 2012 we give to the exalted Christ, the Jesus who will return adorned with a new crown – one befitting His glory, authority, and dominion as King of Kings and Lord of Lords (Rev. 6:2; 14:14).

Dress Rehearsal In Preparation For That Day

Giving in worship is a dress rehearsal of sorts. Reminding ourselves of the day when we will offer the fruit of our lives back to Him. Offering to Him what He has produced in us and through us as a way of saying thanks. Not unlike what these servants are now doing because they understand just how good their master has been to them; because they just can't fathom why he would entrust to them his personal things, his precious resources and by doing so give them the opportunity to serve him and his interests in this world.

Celebrate Good Times – Come On!

So how did the master respond and what did each servant receive in return? While they were not given identical talents, they were each given identical praise. The profitable servants are congratulated on the basis of their faithfulness – faithfulness with those talents the master entrusted to them. Notice – faithfulness in small things (v. 21, 23)!

The Marine Corp. is fond of saying they are looking for a few good men (and women). Jesus is fonder still of saying, "I'm looking for a few good servants." *"It is required of a servant to be found faithful"* (1 Cor. 4:2).

Each of these faithful servants is also rewarded, not only with praise, but by being entrusted with even greater opportunities for service. The master turns right around and reinvests his wealth by entrusting more of it to them. The master doesn't skim the profits off the top solely for himself. He doesn't take the money and run. The master reinvests his resources in his servants.

And as if that weren't enough already, each of these faithful servants are also invited to enter the master's celebration. He throws a party to celebrate with those who have shown themselves trustworthy. Each gets to enjoy the party equally because each has been equally faithful to the particular task entrusted to them.

Food For Thought

1. It is required of a servant to be found faithful (1 Cor. 4:2). As we learn to demonstrate faithfulness in small things, we can and will be entrusted with larger things by Jesus our Lord, our Master; for if we learn to be faithful in little things it is far more likely that we will be faithful in greater things. Of course, the converse is also true as well.
2. Unequal gifts / talents if used with equal faithfulness, receive equal praise from Jesus. None of us have equal skills, abilities, talents, resources, etc. but we can all learn to be equally faithful. We are not held accountable for what we have not been given – but for what we have been. And equal faithfulness will be equally rewarded.
3. The difference between being commended vs. condemned by God hinges on what we actually end up doing with what God has said to us this morning in His Word.

CONCLUSION:

What If 2012 Is The Year Jesus Returns?

1. If Jesus should return this year how would God evaluate your spiritual investment portfolio? Will 2012 finally be the year when God begins to see a return on His investment in your life?
2. A good place to begin this first Sunday of the New Year is to look in the mirror of God's Word and ask yourself: What has God entrusted into my hands? And what will I do with that trust?
3. Your talent is God's gift to you. What you do with your talent is your gift to God.
4. The real issue is not whether Jesus is worthy of my trust – but rather am I worthy of His?

“It is required of a servant to be found faithful” (1 Cor. 4:2).

May God find us faithful.