

“Investing Grace” based on Matthew 25:14-30

Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione on Sunday, Nov. 19, 2023, at Shelby Presbyterian Church

The other day, I was walking in Aldi with Harrison and Josephine, and we got to the end cap with the seasonal “Specially Selected” items. I pointed out that for the first time since last winter, they had figs! My kids love dried mission figs, and so they both audibly cheered! I asked them, “How many bags should I get? One or two?” To which Josephine yelled, “Can we get three, Papa?” So, of course, I bought three bags.

When we got home, I opened the pantry and realized I had a bag of figs in there from last fall. You see, they really love the figs and they used to be available year-round at Aldi, but now, they are a seasonal item, a change that happened in 2020. So, we stocked up during the season, and when we got to the last bag, I suddenly stopped giving figs to the kids in their lunches. They would still have eaten them, but I saved the bag. They probably haven’t had a fig since last January or February. Yet we have had this now expired bag for them. They went without because I was afraid of running out. Even though we had an unopened bag.

How many of you have done this? When we feel as if something might be scarce, or limited, or that if it’s lost it is irreplaceable, we tuck it away and forget about it. I knew a man with a classic car from the 1980s, that sat covered in his garage. He would take it out to wash it, cover it, and put it back in his garage. He said he rarely drove the car because there’s a challenge among owners of this car to have the miles. One sold recently with only 9 miles on it since 1987. What’s the point of owning the car? He let the engine run just enough to keep it going.

But who am I to talk? I told you this story a couple years ago. Claire and I kept a bottle of wine from our honeymoon. Our intention was to drink it on our first anniversary. But we had wine at the restaurant and said, let’s save it for the fifth anniversary. When the fifth anniversary rolled around, we forgot about it. So, we said the tenth anniversary would be the right time. So, we brought it to the beach with us, opened it in 2020 and it was vinegar. We preserved it because it was special, but in the end, we had nothing.

This parable is the third of four parables that Matthew presents about the final judgement. The first presents Jesus’s return like a thief in the night, catching you when you’re drunk or asleep. The second we read last week about the 10 maidens, with five who were foolish and five who were cautious, and the warning to be prepared because we might be left out of the party. The fourth will be the parable of the sheep and the goats - those who served Christ by their love for the humblest people, and those who ignore the needs of their neighbors, will be judged for welcome into heaven or cast out in everlasting punishment.

To consider judgement, in terms of being robbed, left in exile, and everlasting punishment, seems harsh. It seems frightening. It’s a hard pill to swallow because we like to think of Jesus differently. It’s true we focus very much on God’s love, but God’s love is not permission and prosperity. It means service and sacrifice. That’s what God’s love is all about. You are loved by a God who came to serve, not to be served. You are loved by God who entered human flesh to give his life as a ransom, a payment for our lives. If grace and love mean, “all’s good, do whatever you want,” then it is cheap grace. It’s supposed to mean we recognize God’s love for us, and then love in the way God loves us.

I have struggled with our parable today because Luke has a very similar parable from Jesus. But I found comfort when I looked to the early church theologians and saw them treating the parables separately, with one explicitly saying that it is necessary to do so. It's as if Luke and Matthew used the same parable for very different ends, or that Jesus used a similar image to convey two very different points. Either way, it shows the challenge of biblical interpretation and reading scripture.

That means that today, we will only focus on Matthew's version because it presents amid that series of four parables another aspect of living ready – It warns us against holding back what God has given, because we need not let our imaginations process all this punishment stuff in such a way that will lead us to fear God, rather than love God.

So, as we face the reality of these passages, take comfort. What they mean is not that God is looking to destroy each and every one of you. However, it does mean God does not look idly by as injustice happens. God will not ignore when people fail to love one another. Likewise, we do not earn God's love, so these texts remind us that God pursues us all in love, longing to be with us, for us to respond and accept that love to end the misery of this world and participate in new creation by loving as God has loved us.

In our text today, Jesus describes a man going on a journey who calls his servants. He gives to these servants, which can also be translated as enslaved workers, the charge of his belongings. He uses a word for property that is more than just physical stuff, but possessions or belongings, things which have meaning. Then to three particular servants he gives huge sums of money. There are two ways to calculate the value of a talent.

It is an enormous amount of silver either way. To be clear, and not special skills. You know how we got the English meaning of the word 'talent?' People read the King James version of this passage and interpreted it as God speaking of cultivating our special skills and so we have the word talent. As I've said before, God's word doesn't change, but the English language does. This is an example.

The word does not mean your talents, as this is just an interpretation. It means a massive amount of money. A real talent then, can be calculated based on the precious metal that is within it, or it can be calculated based on the value that Rome's command economy placed on it. In the first way, a silver talent was around 60,000 grams of silver, or more than 132lbs, which, at today's value for silver, is nearly \$50,000 right now. Not bad.

But Rome was a command economy which meant the government set the value of things. So, the government mandated that the proper wage for a day laborer was 1 denarius per day and a talent was made up of 6,000 denarii. Since no one making a denarius per day was rich, but it was close to enough to live on, let's say that it's equal in our culture to \$10 per hour for a 10-hour day, or \$100. That means an individual talent is worth \$600,000 in today's money. That's huge.

What Jesus is speaking of here is a massive amount of money entrusted to these servants. Let's use the higher number and consider that the first one got \$3 million dollars. The second got \$1.2 million, and the last one was entrusted with \$600,000. The first two did not fear their lord and were willing to risk it all, to build up the belongings of their lord. But the last one, "went away," leaving the estate perhaps, and buried the money in the ground, hiding it for fear of losing it, having the abundance gone.

If your mind is considering this an encouragement for some system of investment, please set that aside. Likewise, beloved, we do ourselves disservice when we make this text about our personal abilities. It's a good thing to use our special God given skills and develop them for the glory of God. But this text is like the other images of money and treasure in Matthew's gospel. Remember, earlier Jesus said the Kingdom of Heaven is all at once, like a person who finds treasure in a field, then buys the field, or a person who sells all they have to buy a pearl of value. And so, Jesus warns us that where our treasure is, meaning, wherever what we value most is located, that is where our heart is found as well.

Beloved, the Kingdom of Heaven, the gospel, the grace of Jesus, salvation, and God's love – these are all things to be seen within this incredible wealth entrusted to the servants. It does not matter whether you get five talents, two talents, or one talent, Being entrusted with something of such an immense value is life changing. That is what we receive when we accept that in Jesus, God shared in our humanity, born a baby and set in a manger, humbly, to live as we live, within our limits, revealing God to us, and then dying for us, even though he was without sin. He bore the full weight of sin and death for us, only to rise again for us – returning to God for us – and giving us then, the Holy Spirit.

Beloved, think of the immensity of that – the Creator of all things became just like you. Indeed, the architect of all things, to whom everything belongs, was born a human in Bethlehem. He spoke this parable on the steps of the temple. He was cast out of the city to die on a Roman cross for slaves and rebels. All of this was done, not because he had done anything wrong, but because earthly power was threatened by this man who had no army, but embodied the most threatening thing of all – The power of love, forgiveness, and mercy in a world of hate, grudges, and revenge.

This good news means that both individually and collectively, we are now God's temple, because the Holy Spirit of God lives in and among us, as our salvation, our new life. Beloved, this is a gift presented to you, not because you understand it or because you believe everything perfectly and only if you believe perfectly are you really saved. No, this gift is presented to you because God loves you. Whether you grasp the size of this gift or not, God loves you and calls you time and time again to turn to Jesus.

Yes, the evil of this world – all that causes misery – from the fracturing of personal relationships in feuds, to the fracturing of global relationships in war. These will all be judged in the end. If that's what we're holding on to, we will have nothing, and what we think we do have, will be taken away.

The mistake of the third servant was that the servant feared the lord's judgement, or at least his own version of judgement. He says he "knows" with the concrete verb, "to know," or '*ginosko*,' in Greek. He believes he has knowledge of the Lord as a hard man, a dry man, a thief, who reaps where he did not sow, and gathers from where he did not scatter, and out of fear of losing this monumental sum of money, he goes away and hides it – to make sure it's all there.

The response of the Lord is interesting, he says, "you perceived" or '*oida*' to know by your eyes, He perceives he was a hard man who reaps where he did not sow, gathers where he did not scatter. The lord in this story is not admitting he is hard and a thief, so what follows then, is not an endorsement of giving money to the bankers. He is saying, "if that's what you thought of me, why didn't you just give to the bankers, for they are hardened and they steal their gains.

The other two servants held the massive weight of what had been given to them and used it, they let this money empower them to do great things – that is the whole point. You see, when you say you are saved, that you believe the gospel, you have been saved by grace through faith, this is not a reward, a reason for you to live in fear of God and go away, hiding from the world so that you do not sin as the world sins. No, it's meant to empower you to go into the world and change it.

When we take the love, grace, and mercy of the good news and live ready, it means answering God's call to serve, to forgive, and reconcile this world in Christ. Reconciliation is not a free pass, but the tender balance of calling out injustice, while also forgiving others, even if we think they don't deserve it. Even if they didn't make the right apology. It means giving from our abundance to meet the needs of others, and building dignity by sitting alongside people to see those in hardship as equals and not as inferiors who need us to save them. It means loving our enemies, praying for their good, for God's mercy, not wishing their downfall. In all we do, living ready is about repairing the world, through relationships, one by one.

Beloved, the ideologies of this world, get this all wrong, no matter what side you're on – Right, Left, up, down, whatever. This gospel is countercultural to all ideologies because the point is not to divide and win, but to be a ministry of reconciliation, where people who think differently, come from different nations, different races, different anything, can come together.

For just as God brought God's own self together with humanity in Jesus, even though God has every right to just say, "I'm done with you all," so then, we are to seek reconciliation with the same humility. Each of us have been given the gift of Jesus and it is precious and pure, but it is not scarce. As with a toy we may treat like a model, and then not use it for fear it might break or we may lose it, or those figs we treat as a commodity that we hoard for fear of going without, yet never enjoy.

We don't have to shelve, cover, or bury the treasure that has been entrusted to us. We are called to risk it, even if it means being taken advantage of, even if it means losing it, or even if it means compromising. The treasure empowers us to join God's work in this world. After all by the world's eyes, Jesus was taken advantage of when the people he healed didn't come back to thank him. Jesus lost on the cross. Rome one. It killed that rebel. The whole idea of God becoming human was a compromise of love on God's part.

This treasure allows us to join in God's work, so, be not afraid of what this world would say about our faith. Be not afraid of God's judgement and wrath, which are real, but seek the Lord first and the Kingdom of heaven. Do not bury the treasure of grace, but trade with it, make it your currency, and see what happens. Amen.