

Main Street UNITED METHODIST CHURCH



Luke 19:11-28 **“Jesus Plays For Keeps”**

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(17th Sunday After Pentecost)

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“Following Christ From City Center!”

LUKE 19:11-28 "LIFE IS FOR KEEPS"

Kingdom Is Future, Interim For Disciples? End Of Rebels?

1) v.11 INTRODUCTION: SPEECH AND JOURNEY TO JERUSALEM (L). Journey About To End

11* As they heard these things, he proceeded to tell a parable, They Ignore 9:22, 43-45, 18:31-34, Not In Lectionary
a because he was near to Jerusalem, (Kingdom/Rule [basilea] 5x), Reason 1: Time Is Short, Climax Of Story?
b and because they supposed that the kingdom* of God was to appear immediately. 17:20, 18:38, I Sam. 5, Reason 2: Error
Acts 1:6, Not Yet! We Live In The Interval, A Test

2) vv.12-27 ALLEGORY OF THE KING'S RETURN: REWARD AND JUDGMENT.

//Mark 13:34, Mt. 25:14-30 (Triple Tradition), Gospel Of Nazarenes 18

a) v.12 His Departure And Promised Return. Throne Claimant, Jews Go To Rome For Titles

12* He said therefore, "A nobleman went into a far country to receive a kingdom* and then return. Acts 1:11, 3:20-21
//Herod, Archelaus (4 BC), Opposition (Ant. 13. 302, 17.374-389)

b) v.13 Stewardship Among His Servants During His Absence.

Group 1 13 Calling ten of his servants, The Calling, The Giving, The Commission, Interim, Arrival
he gave them ten minas, and said to them, 'Trade with these till I come.' How Will They Do?
1/60 Of A Talent, Mina (100 Days, 3 Months's Wages!)

c) v.14 Resistance Of His Reign Among His Non-Servants (L).

Group 2 14* But his citizens hated him and sent an embassy after him, saying, 19:41-44, 47 Common Chorus
'WE DO NOT WANT THIS MAN TO REIGN* OVER US.' Appeal To Emperor
Who And What We Are Is Revealed Over Time, Truth Is Told

a') v.15a His Return With Kingdom Credentials.

15* When he returned, having received the kingdom,* Jesus' Royal Arrival At Parousia
Indeterminate Future Return
God Deals With The Faithful, The Fearful, The Rebellious

b') vv.15b-26 Accountability For Stewardship: Degrees Of Reward/Punishment.

Group 1 "Be Faithful" he commanded these servants, to whom he had given the money, The Calling
to be called to him, that he might know what they had gained by trading. The Giving Reviewed
12:25-48 On Accountability, Rom. 12:6 First, Second, Third Groups
Report: 1000 Percent (1)
16 The first came before him, saying, Blessing (2)
1 'Lord, your mina has made ten mina more.' The Faithful Risk
2 And he said to him, 'Well done, good servant! Rev. 2:26-27, Reward Of Great Rule (3)
3 Because you have been faithful in a very little, Question = What Capacity Is Built Into Me?
you shall have authority over ten cities.' In Kingdom All Are Filled Full = Fulfilled
18 And the second came, saying, Report: 500 Percent (1)
1 'Lord, your mina has made five minas.' Blessing (Ellipsis: Omitted) (2)
(2) (Blessing Omitted But Presumed) Reward Of Rule (3)
19 3 And he said to him, 'And you are to be over five cities.' Some Believe But Do Not Trust
20 1 Then another came, saying, Took Money, Not Accept Commission, False Image Of Master
'Lord, here is your mina, which I kept laid away in a napkin; Report: 0 Percent (1)
21 for I was afraid of you, because you are a severe man; Play It Safe, Attack On His Character
you take up what you did not lay down, and reap what you did not sow.' He Disobeyed, Distrusted
22 2 He said to him, 'I will condemn you out of your own mouth, you wicked servant! Curse (2)
You knew that I was a severe man, If This Is My Character, Why Not Act Differently?
taking up what I did not lay down and reaping what I did not sow? Question No. 1
23 Why then did you not put my money into the bank, Question No. 2
and at my coming I should have collected it with interest?'
24 3 And he said to those who stood by, //1 Cor. 3:10, No Reward/Loss (3)
'Take the mina from him, and give it to him who has the ten mina.'
25 And they said to him, 'Lord, he has ten mina!' (Absent from C. Bezae), Protest
26 'I tell you, that to every one who has/ will more be given; Kingdom Principle
but from him who has not/, even what he has will be taken away. Truth
Who Rules Me? Disciples, Be Faithful! Others, Be Warned!

c') v.27 Dealing With The Rebellious: Destruction Only. Lesser/Greater

Group 2 27* "Be Warned" But as for these enemies of mine, WHO DID NOT WANT ME TO REIGN OVER THEM,
bring them here and slay them before me.'" Those Who Know & Resists His Rule Are Doomed
Herod And Archelaus: (War 1. 351-358, 2.11) = Partial Allegory Of Salvation

1') v.28 CONCLUSION: COMPLETION OF SPEECH AND JOURNEY TO JERUSALEM (L).

Story/Allegory : 1) Kingdom, 2) Stewardship, 3) Rebellion

28 And when he had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem. Climb, Sense Of Direction/Momentum

A Brief Treatment Of Luke 19:11-28

This thought unit is the last in the journey to Jerusalem begun in 9:51. Reference to *Bethphage and Bethany* (v.29) signal the start of the passion narrative (19:28-24:53). The surface structure is a 3:1 concentric pattern (1. v.11, 2. vv.12-27, 1' v.28) with v.11 and v.28 as the Lukan introduction and conclusion to the two-stanza comparison (vv.12-14 // vv.15-27). The phrases *he proceeded to tell a parable* (v.11) // *And when he had said this* (v.28) and *Jerusalem* (v.11b // v.28) are inclusions. The healing of the blind man (18:31-43), the salvation of Zacchaeus (19:1-10), and teaching of the disciples (19:11-28) all occur in the Jericho area (18:35, 19:1, 11). Jesus is *going up to Jerusalem* (v.28) and arrives *at the mount that is called Olivet* (v.29a). This unit is strategically placed and deserves a careful reading.

Luke integrates three strands into a whole. His introduction (v.11) raises the issue of the immanence of the kingdom, the answer being, “Signs are present, but the arrival remains future,” thus the gap between the nobleman receiving a kingdom (v.12) and his royal arrival (v.15). Jesus receives a kingdom at his resurrection/ascension, but there is an indeterminate time before his return. The second strand is a *throne claimant* story modeled on the pattern of would-be Jewish kings traveling to Rome for authority and title, sometimes with opposing groups going to protest the bestowal and saying, “We do not want *this man* to rule over us” (v.14b). The recent political becomes an analogy for the ultimate cosmic. Those who resist Jesus’ reign will be defeated (v.27a), just as Jewish kings sometimes eliminated opponents (Josephus, *Jewish War* 1.351-358, 2.11). The third strand is a two-stanza allegory (vv.12-27) with echoes in Matthew 25:14-30, but there are so many differences between the two they are likely parallel developments and not dependent. Luke has woven the strands together to teach 1) that the arrival of the kingdom is future (cf. Acts 1:1-11), 2) that Jesus is the world’s rightful ruler and intends to *reign* over followers and enemies, 3) that the interim is a time for testing faithfulness and leading to a judgment for believers and outsiders. These themes are found in the Nicene Creed, “He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.... We look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.” *De jure* rule will be *de facto*; until then we invest and live in hope.

Despite Jesus warnings about his death (9:22, 43-45, 18:31-34), political hopes run high (v.11b). Perhaps, like King David, he will take Jerusalem as his capital (1 Sam. 5). To correct the false idea *that the kingdom of God was to appear immediately*, he tells a story in two stanzas (vv.12-14, vv.15-27), each with three parallel parts (a. v.12 // a’ v.15a = Departure and Return; b. v.13 // b’ vv.15b-26 = Charge and Accountability; c. v.14 // c’ v.27 = Resistance and Retaliation). Jewish history is invoked. In 4BC after King Herod’s death, his son Archelaus went to Augustus in Rome for his father’s title. He was opposed by a Judean contingent of fifty, the result being he received the lesser title *ethnarch*, later revoked because of abuse of power. While a man of noble birth pursues a crown, ten servants are given a substantial sum and charged to trade with it so assets will not lie dormant (v.13). Others resist the bestowal of a kingdom, “We do not want *this man* to reign over us” (v.14b). There are two groups related to the nobleman and his quest: servants and political enemies. When he returns with authority (v.15a) there is an abbreviated accounting. The highest achiever received one mina and made ten more, a 1000% return. He is commended, “Well done, good servant,” and promoted to the rule of ten cities from his master’s new realm. Same for the next, only the return and rule are reduced by half. The third servant is more complicated. He’s been disobedient out of fear, slanders the master’s character, and did not have the wisdom to earn minimal interest. Faith means risk; faith means trusting the master’s character and his trust of me. The fearful disciple is rebuked and preserved, not so those who reject Jesus’ rule (v.27). To believers the call is *Be faithful*, and for all others *Be warned* because he bears a sword. Is Jesus Lord?

JESUS PLAYS FOR KEEPS

“We do not want this man to reign over us.”

If not Jesus, then Who?

LUKE 19:14b

A man once said to himself, “If I had some extra money, I’d give it to God, but I have just enough to support myself and my family.”

A little later he said, “If I had some extra time, I’d give it to God, but every minute of my time is taken up with job, family, clubs and what have you- every single minute.”

Yet a third time the man said to himself, “If I had a talent, I’d give it to God, but I have no lovely voice; I have no special skill; I have never been able to lead a group; I can’t think cleverly or quickly, the way I would like to.”

The heart of God was touched, and although it was not policy, God gave the man money and time and glorious talent. Then God waited and waited and waited. God then shrugged his shoulders and took back the talent, the time, and the money.

After a time of reflection, the man sighed, “If I only had some of that money back, I’d give it to God. If I only had some of that time, I’d give it to God. If I could only rediscover that glorious talent, I’d give it to God.”

And God said, “Aw, shut up.”

He told his friends, “You know, I’m not so sure I believe in God anymore.”¹

I guess I was about the last of the *marbles generation*. My dad played marbles as a kid and taught me. I remember my mother sewing me a marbles bag with a leather drawstring. Cat’s eyes, ball bearings we called *steelies*, and some big, clear green fiberglass ones that came from the local Burlington plant and were highly prized. Early on, after several painful incidents with older boys, I learned that at the start of every game terms must be clearly negotiated. Was this *funzies*? meaning no

¹ *God Is No Fool* (Nashville, TN: Abington Press, 1969), found at www.sermon-illustrations.com/a-z/s/stewardship.

one lost and all marbles were to be returned at the end of the game, or was this *for keeps*? meaning you gambled and won or lost. Your marbles bag was either fatter or slacker at the end of recess if you played *for keeps*. And when it was *for keeps*, both anxiety and the stakes went up. It mattered.

I have it on good authority that Jesus plays *for keeps*. “And he shall come again to judge the living and the dead,” is the way The Creed summarizes the Scripture on this issue. Jesus is deadly serious about whether or not we invite him to *reign over us*, and that’s because the only way he can remake us in this life and fit us for the next is if he has effective control, which in the parable is termed *rule* or *reign*. Life is not a casual affair; it’s not for *funzies*. You are born without being asked; you live in the broken world as it is; you then die and face the truth of your life and what you’ve become. The stakes are high; it’s your life we’re talking about! A session of truth-telling is coming with incredible rewards and losses, to the point some will lose their selves, as in the imagery of verse 27, “But as for these enemies of mine, who did not want me to reign over them, bring them here *and slay them before me*.” There will be no room in the new world for anyone who knew and rejected Jesus’ rightful rule over them. Regarding those who have never heard of Jesus, about which so many seem to worry, we will leave them to God’s mercy and justice to do what’s right. The issue in the story is those *who knew the character of the man* and did not want him to rule over him. So the question is not, “What about those who never heard?” The question here is, “What about those who knew him and rejected his rule?”

Autonomy, the rule of the self by the self, is not the goal of life. Life is fulfilled when the self surrenders to the wisdom of the One who made it and comes to reclaim it in Jesus Christ. I am not meant to be ruled by you or you by me, and I do not work best when I’m the only one in charge of my life. I need a wise and good King, and in Jesus I found one worth trusting with all I have, which in the end is just little-ole-me and the mess I am!

In 1969 Sinatra sang the ballad of the self-ruled, *I Did It My Way*, and many took his lyrics as their modern Creed of self-rule and self-assertion and self-fulfillment. But there are forces arrayed against us all- forces of sin and ignorance, powers of evil and death- that no amount of resources or self-assertion can conquer, so *to do it my way* is in the end a dead end, perhaps an heroic one but still a dead end. I need a benevolent and wise and powerful ruler beyond myself, and no one has the credentials for the job but one, and that is a Jesus who comes from the heart of God to show us the way and to be the bridge and pay the price. I need him *to rule over me*

as Lord, to channel my strengths, to forgive my sins, to correct my flaws of character, to change the way I think and what I value, to heal my splintered heart and give me new desires, to give me a piece of his holy and happy work, to protect me from evil in all its disguises, to hear my muddled and contradictory prayers, and above all, to teach me how to love and how to watch for the winds of his Spirit to fill my sails. At age nineteen I bent the knee and said *Yes Sir, Will you have me?* And I have been saluting and studying and taking orders and receiving correction and encouragement and so it will be. It is not an easy way because it is squarely opposed to the way our world is currently run, but it is the only way to hear, “Well done, good servant!” That is what you want when life is over. At this point my honest prayer is, “Don’t let me quit. Don’t let me quit running before I cross the finish line.” Yes, I could be wrong. Yes, I could be a misguided, religious fool and bigot, but I don’t think so. The cumulative evidence is worth taking the risk of trust and betting my life not on *my way* but on *his way*. And when I die I will know.

“But Lord,” some will protest, “we thought the game of life was *for funzies*.”

“No,” will come the reply, “It was *for keeps*, and you did not let me rule over you.” No wonder this text if not found in the lectionary of readings used by many churches. It’s just too offensive to our modern prejudices, even in the church.

There is a great resistance in our relativistic world to the idea of God as righteous judge, and yet nothing that is stressed more strongly in the Bible. In his book *Knowing God*, Dr. J.I. Packer vigorously defends the necessity of God as Judge:

“Would a God who did not care about the difference between right and wrong be a good and admirable Being? Would a God who put no distinction between the beasts of history, the Hitlers and the Stalins (if we dare to use such names), and His own saints, be morally praiseworthy and perfect? Moral indifference would be an imperfection of God, not a perfection. But not to judge the world would be to show moral indifference. The final proof that God is a perfect moral being, not indifferent to questions of right and wrong, is the fact that He has committed Himself to judge the world.”²

One of the best sellers of the mid-90's was Betty Eadie’s *Embraced By The Light*, which was on the *New York Times* bestseller list for forty weeks, including five

² (London: Hodder & Staughton, 1973), 130.

at number one. Hot stuff from a closet Mormon. But in that book the ideas of hell and judgment are nowhere found; all is sweetness and light. In November 1973 Eadie allegedly died after undergoing a hysterectomy and returned five hours later with the secrets of heaven revealed by Jesus. She wrote that Jesus, and I quote, “never wanted to do or say anything *that would offend me*” while she visited heaven. Please, Mrs. Eadie, cut the psycho-babble, self-indulgence! Jesus is offensive; it’s why they strung him up. One reviewer commented that in Eadie’s theology Jesus is relegated to the role of happy tour guide of heaven, not the Savior of the world who died on the cross and who warned us ahead of time that life is for keeps and judgment assured.³

What’s missing is what filled so many of Jesus’ parables, that the God of holy love and all knowing righteousness is going to honestly evaluate each of us based on what we did with Jesus and the resources he gave us. Was there a return on investment? I see no other way to read *The Story Of The Good King’s Return*.⁴

TURNING TO THE TEXT

The Setting (v.11)

The journey to Jerusalem is almost at an end. The final confrontation is ahead; expectation is building among the crowds. This could be the moment God’s kingdom finally crashes in upon history to change everything in their favor, verse 11: “They supposed that the kingdom of God *was to appear immediately*.”

It was an understandable error because of all Jesus had done, things only the Messiah could do. A cross and resurrection and ascension are ahead for Jesus; but the final arrival of the kingdom is still a ways off. There’s a long interim between the nobleman’s departure to receive authority and his return to reclaim his turf. So to correct their error, and to remind them of their ongoing duties for the long haul ahead, Jesus “proceeded to tell a parable.”

³ Richard Abanes, *Christianity Today*, March 7, 1994, 53.

⁴ For several readings and an exegetical history of this much-disputed and oft-ignored passage, see Klyne Snodgrass, *Stories With Intent* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 519-542; Arland Hultgren, *The Parables Of Jesus: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI; Eerdmans, 2000), 282-291; John Dominic Crossan, *The Power of Parable: How Fiction By Jesus Became Fiction About Jesus* (San Francisco, CA: HarperCollins, 2012), 98-107; David Garland, *Luke* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 754-764.

A parable respects peoples’ intelligence. Jesus did not say, “Your timing is way off. The kingdom is still future.” Instead he told a parable and left it hanging in the air. Jesus would rather tell a story than tell you what to do. Occasionally he gave commands, but more often told stories. Some scholars say this is not one story but two woven together, one about money given to servants and a second about a nobleman who becomes a king and kills his enemies as political revenge.⁵ They may have been separate at one time,⁶ but in Luke they are now integrated into one telling as a warning to two audiences, one already believing in him, the other still rebellious against his right to rule. With Jesus it’s not only outsiders who are judged but also insiders. The line of sin and disobedience does not just run between the church and the world; it runs down the middle of the church, as our third servant is about to learn.

The Parable, Part I (vv.12-14)

The first three verses, 12 through 14, set up the characters and the plot. This is a *before* and *after* story with the middle left blank. The nobleman left. We don’t know how long he was gone; the time is indeterminate, just like the time between Jesus ascension and return. We don’t know, but that *not knowing* does not weaken the story, in fact it heightens it with the issues of faithfulness and patience. What do you do when the wait is long and people wonder, “Is he ever coming back?”

“A nobleman went into a far country to receive a kingdom and then return.” That sounds odd to us who live in a democracy; we don’t have noblemen and kingdoms; we have representatives and republics. But in Jesus’ day Palestine was under Roman rule, and anyone who aspired to kingship had to go to Rome to have it conferred. In 4BC when King Herod the Great died, his sons Archelaus and Antipas both went to Rome to receive the divided kingdom of their father. The Judeans who did not want Archelaus to rule sent an embassy of fifty representatives to oppose his request. They did not want *him to reign over them*, and the reason was clear. He’d already slaughtered 3,000 of his countrymen in the Temple precincts and reduced the once flourishing nation to near poverty. Augustus gave them the lesser title *ethnarch* and divided the kingdom between the two sons. Archelaus later lost his for excessive

⁵ Charles Talbert, *Luke* (New York: Crossroads, 1984), 177.

⁶ Matthew 25:14-30 does not contain the vengeance of the nobleman become king, though the theme of judgment is clearly present.

cruelty.⁷ Brutal reprisals were common, verse 27: “But as for these enemies of mine, *who did not want me to reign over them*, bring them here and slay them before me.” So the story of Jesus draws on political memories and frankly acknowledges the way things worked at the time. To the victor go the spoils; the rest get the sword. The most basic question is, *Who’s going to rule?* Jesus says he is at his return, and what will not be ruled by him will be removed. Jesus plays for keeps because he has the credentials and the scars and the glory and he’s coming back to claim what’s his, and that’s everything. Every atom in the universe is marked *Property of the Triune God*.

But beneath the reference to known events is another story, a deeper allegory. The nobleman is Jesus; the far country is his presence with God the Father after resurrection and ascension; the present kingship is his invisible rule, and his return is the universal establishment of that rule here on earth at the end of the age and the descent of the kingdom of God. During that interval there are many citizens of this world who live in open rebellion, who frankly “do not want *this man Jesus* to reign over us” because of the change it requires. They oppose his rule because they like it better their way. There are others in the world, “his servants,” who during his absence are entrusted with resources and given a task, “Trade with these till I come.” The Lord above, the world beneath, and two kinds of people dwell here, those who accept his rule and those who reject it. Those who accept his rule are given gifts and tasks to express the will and wishes of their absent Lord. Every Christian has resources, chief among which are spiritual gifts. One of mine is teaching; it’s what I am to trade in. And when I do it faithfully, guess what? I am affected, and so are other people. That’s how it is with whatever the Lord entrusts with you.

The best analogy is a stock broker. Jesus chose an analogy from business. Resources are entrusted, and the job requires his servants to take risks. Faith is not playing it safe; faith is spelled R-I-S-K. Hudson Taylor, great missionary of the 19th century, said, “Unless there is an element of risk in our exploits for God, there is no need for faith.”⁸ Faithfulness is not about minimizing risk and always playing it safe; it’s about bold obedience to the master’s command, “Trade with these till I come.” We are to use his stuff for productive ventures, not frivolous gambling. We are to trust in his character and in his trust of us. There’s good work to do to increase the fame of Jesus in the earth. God wants a return. More love, more wisdom, greater

⁷ R. Alan Culpepper, *Luke, The New Interpreter’s Bible, Vol. IX* (Nashville, TN: Abington, 1995) 363.

⁸ Paul Borthwick, *Leading The Way* (Colorado Spring, CO: NavPress, 1989), 153.

justice, lives changed. John Wesley wrote, “The Possessor of heaven and earth placed you here, not as a proprietor, but as a steward.”⁹ Jesus said, “Trade with these till I come.” I like the little poem:

“There was a very cautious man
Who never laughed or played;
He never risked, he never tried,
He never sang or prayed.
And when he one day passed away
Insurance was denied;
For since he never really lived,
They claim he never died.”¹⁰

There is a certain sharpness and slyness among those who are good at trading stocks. The excitement of closing a good deal, the constant research and gathering of information for strategic decisions, an awareness that a lot rides on their decisions. Where did we lose this in the church? When did we become the society for the preservation of nostalgic religion rather than God’s kingdom brokers entering this world every day with the determination to increase the portfolio of our master whose command is our mandate, “Trade with these till I come.”

I will not apologize for being serious in my work. I will not apologize for teaching every chance I get and trying to stop the *dumbing down* of the church. I will not apologize for asking you to tithe and give offerings. I will not because Jesus has given me a Holy Spirit and a Holy Bible and a Holy Church and the Holy Sacraments and a Holy Calling and Holy Vows and said, “Here Phil, trade with these till I come. Make something of it while I’m away.” Did you not receive the same command? What are you doing with it? Bring me a trading report; let me see a balance sheet for your life. In Vegas they call them *players*, in the trading pits of New York and Chicago they’re know as *traders*, and in the church they’re known as *disciples*. “Calling his servants, he gave them ten pounds, and said to them, ‘Trade with these till I come.’” Not risking is not an option. Well it is, just not a very attractive one in the end, as we are about to discover..

The Parable, Part II (vv.15-26)

⁹ PreachingToday.com.

¹⁰ Idem.

Part II of *The Parable Of The Good King's Return* begins in verse 15, and here we arrive at the end of history. The last trading bell has sounded; it 's time for the final audit. And the first ones to be judges are not the heathen but the disciples. "When he returned, having received the kingdom, he commanded these servants, to whom he had given the money, to be called to him, that he might know what they had gained by trading." Daniel Webster wrote, "My greatest thought is my accountability to God."¹¹ And each of us are there with them, listening and waiting our turn when all secrets shall be known and a verdict rendered on what we've done with the gifts of God, the greatest of which is Jesus Christ.

As a personal aside, I freely admit I do not understand the deeper meanings of my own life. I am largely ignorant of the thing I am most close to, which is me. The family history that came before me. Where I missed God and the effects it had. Where I obeyed and the effects it had. The pressures for good and evil I did not comprehend. They are hid from me as they are from you. "We see through a mirror dimly" said Paul, "but then face to face."¹² I am sobered by having to face such a truth telling, but it is not a fear of consequences since I have already passed through the judgment in Jesus Christ who took my place. But it will, I think, be a relief to see and know the truths of all the connections, all the places I was preserved by God's mercy and protected by holy angels, all the workings of divine providence, and what mattered to heaven of the work I did. Mercy is already mine, and on that day I will know the truth and praise Christ face to face. Only then will I see clearly, and I expect it will be a great relief.

Each of the three judgment scenes has four parts: 1) the appearance, 2) the report, 3) the evaluation, and 4) the reward. The returns for the first two traders are phenomenal. The first a thousand percent, the second five hundred. Whatever Christ has given you by way of spiritual gifts, material goods, talents or abilities is capable of an enormous increase. This is a word of hope. Your life can make an enormous difference. It may not look like much now, but when prayerfully used over the years it can grow to enormous effect. "Lord, your mina made ten more.... Lord, your mina made five more." Why are we surprised when this happens?

Don't you want to hear the words, "Well done, good servant." I do, because on that day no one else's opinion counts. None of those I have tried to please get a

¹¹ Sermonillustration.com/a-z/accountability.

¹² 1 Cor. 13:12.

vote. All that will matter, and what will determine your reward or lack, is what you did with Jesus and his gifts. Were you a trader? No one knows the details of what we will preside over in the kingdom of God. But the image of ten cities is a reminder that the reward of Christ is far beyond what we imagine and that our responsibilities do not end with this life. Fred Smith, founder of the Fed Ex empire, wrote, “God entrusts us with money as a test; for like a toy to a child, it is training for handling things of more value.”¹³ And even here in the kingdom of God the reward is fitted to our capacity, one over ten, another over five, both deployed at full capacity without envy towards one another. There will be many surprises on that day. Many Christians and preachers we thought prominent receiving only modest rewards; people we dismissed receiving great rewards for their faithfulness with the little that was given. Faithfulness is success in God’s eyes, and God always multiplies where there is faithfulness to take risks for the kingdom of God. The world seeks success; followers of Christ aim at faithfulness and excellence, trusting God for results.

But then there is the dark side of the Christian judgment in verses 20 through 24. A believer with just enough faith to make them miserable and not enough to make them confident and productive. They want to be saved, but they still have lingering doubts about the goodness of God. Been in church for years but no real change in their life. Still not using their spiritual gifts, don’t know much Bible, still waiting for that magic experience to fix their problems, wanting the church to lower standards and make them the norm, complaining when the preaching pricks their conscience. Know anyone like that? They justify their inaction by accusing God of bad character, “...you are a severe man, you take up what you did not lay down, and reap what you did not sow.” Christians who call God a cheat! Can you believe it?

Christ has wicked servants. Is that a new idea? Not the wickedness of morally bad deeds but the wickedness of sloth and neglect. Doing everything but what they’ve been commissioned to do, “Trade with these till I come.” They will be saved, but they will bring nothing with them, no treasures to lay at his feet. What a waste. Let today be the day you stand up and say No to fear and invite Jesus into the details. Live in a way that you may hear, “Well done, good servant!” and not stand embarrassed with “you wicked servant” ringing in your ears. Come under his *reign*.

It’s not about copying anyone else or comparing yourself with anyone else and their gifts. Servants don’t get to judge one another; only the Lord does that job with

¹³ *Leadership*, Vol. 4, No. 1.

perfect knowledge and understanding. It's about grabbing hold of the grace of God and the resources God has given and doing something with them by the power of the Spirit that will make Jesus want to claim you as one of his own. It's never too late to become a faithful servant, "Trade with these till I come." Jesus wants you to have a piece of the action.

I wondered this week: Who is the *they* of verse 25, "And *they* said to him, 'Lord, he (already) has ten pounds.'" I think it was more of the same half-hearted bunch that also wrapped their pounds in a napkin and did nothing with it; they saw the loss that was ahead for them as well. Even here at the gate of the kingdom they have not let go of envy. But the rule of the kingdom of God is this, "You may repent, but you are not allowed to whine, as in the case of the complaint, 'But Lord, they already have more than I do.'"

After a while the man sighed and said, "If I only had some of that money back, I'd give it to God. If I only had some of that time, I'd give it to God. If I could only rediscover that glorious talent, I'd give it to God."

And God said, "Aw, shut up."

Now that's a loose paraphrase of verse 26, "I tell you, that to every one who has will more be given; and from him who has not, even what he has will be taken away." God can trust his friends with a lot and some of his own kids with nothing at all. There's no shortage of opportunities or resources in the kingdom of God. The key is faithfulness in little things *now*. Scripture teaches a variety of rewards in heaven, suited to the capacity of our proven faithfulness in the here and now.

The Lost (v.27)

C.S. Lewis wrote:

"There is no doctrine which I would more willingly remove from Christianity than this (hell) if it lay in my power. But it has the full support of Scripture and especially, of our Lord's own words; it has always been held by Christendom, and has the support of reason."¹⁴

Knowing the history of what returning Jewish kings sometimes did to those

¹⁴ Quoted in Kenneth Kantzer, *Christianity Today*, February 21, 1986, 12.

who opposed their rule, I read verse 27 for you to ponder, “But as for these enemies of mine, *who did not want me to rule over them*, bring them here and slay them before me.” It was an historical analogy Jesus drew on with great effect. But the fact is that God needs no sword. He just has to reach over and cut off the switch. Not to be ruled by this God of holy love is to become less and less real till nothing much is left.

When Jesus finished the parable, he simply closed his mouth and started walking again towards Jerusalem. He left the story hanging there in the imagination of his hearers to do its continuing work, verse 28: “And when he had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem.” Not a lot of fuss. Very matter of fact. Just a story about the way things are and they way things are going to be from a kingdom point of view. A window into truth and what we are to do with it in the here and now.

CONCLUSION

Since Jesus chose a profit-oriented business analogy for Christian faithfulness, I want to close with something similar, a quote from the richest man on the planet, Bill Gates, who in his book *Business @ the Speed of Thought* writes:

“A good e-mail system ensures that bad news can travel fast, but your people have to be willing to send you the news. You have to be constantly receptive to bad news, and then you have to act on it. Sometimes I think my most important job as CEO is to listen for bad news. If you don’t act on it, your people will eventually stop bringing bad news to your attention....”

That is the preface. Now here is the meat:

“The willingness to hear hard truth is vital not only for CEO’s of big corporations but also for anyone who loves the truth. Sometimes the truth sounds like bad news, but that is just what we need.”¹⁵

I’m told Jesus plays for keeps.

Whether that’s good or bad news is up to you. I tremble when I consider the judgments of God in history and at the end, and it makes me all the more grateful to have Jesus rule over me now.

¹⁵ “To Illustrate,” *Leadership*, Summer 2000, 67.
