

# The Talents

## **Sermon Text: Matthew 25:14-30**

Grace, mercy and peace be to you from our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, Amen.

*<sup>14</sup>For it [the Kingdom of Heaven] is like a man who going away on a journey, called his own servants and delivered to them his possessions. <sup>15</sup>And to one he gave five talents, to another two and to another one, each according to his own ability, and he immediately went away on a journey. <sup>16</sup>Going away the one who had received five talents invested them and gained another five. <sup>17</sup>Likewise the one with two gained another two. <sup>18</sup>The one who had received one, going away dug a hole in the ground and hid the silver of his lord. <sup>19</sup>And after a long time the lord comes to those servants and settled accounts with them. <sup>20</sup>And coming, the one who had received five talents produced another five talents, saying, "lord, you gave five talents to me, behold another 5 talents were gained." <sup>21</sup>His lord said to him, "well done, good and faithful servant, with little you were faithful, I will put you in charge of much. Enter into the joy of your lord." <sup>22</sup>And coming, the one with two talents said, "lord, you gave me two talents, behold another two talents I give to you." <sup>23</sup>And His lord said to him, "well done, good and faithful servant, with little you were faithful, I will put you in charge of much. Enter into the joy of your lord." <sup>24</sup>And coming, the one who had received one talent said, "lord, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping what you did not sow and gathering from where you did not scatter seed. <sup>25</sup>And I was afraid, and going away I hid your talent in the ground, behold you have yours." <sup>26</sup>Answering, his lord said to him, "you wicked and lazy servant, you knew that I reap what I did not sow and gather from where I did not scatter seed. <sup>27</sup>Therefore you ought to have deposited my silver with the banker, and at my coming I would have received my own with interest. <sup>28</sup>Therefore, take away from him the talent and give it to the one having ten talents. For everyone who has, more will be given and he will have an abundance, but the one who does not have, what he has will be taken from him. <sup>30</sup>And the worthless servant, cast him out into the outer darkness, there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."*

Lord sanctify us by your truth, your Word is truth. Amen.

The 25<sup>th</sup> Chapter of Matthew contains three parables concerning faith and the Second Coming of Christ. Last week we discussed the parable of the Ten Virgins and today we will discuss the parable of the Talents. These two parables are very closely connected, in fact Jesus starts the second parable with for (or because) as a continuation of the parable of the Ten Virgins.

This parable starts with a man who is about to set out on a long journey. While he is away his servants are left in charge of his possessions. So he calls his servants to himself and divides his money among them, giving to each an amount that matches their ability. To the first he gives 5 talents, to the second he gives two and to the third he gives one. Now, these talents were silver coins, roughly worth 7300 denarii. One talent was about 30 years worth of labour.

After the master leaves on his journey the first two servants take their talents and invest them. Both of them receive their money back with an additional 100% profit. But the last servant, perceived his master to a hard man. We can notice that Jesus never calls the master a hard man, but that this was simply how the servant viewed his master. This last servant took the single talent that he had received and buried it in the ground, a common practice in those days.

Eventually the master returns home and comes to his servants. The first two servants bring to their master the talents that he had given them and the profits that they had gained for their master. The master is thrilled with their work and decides to make them managers of much more. It is important to note at this point that the master does not praise them on the money they received but on the work they did. He doesn't say, "well done, you got me some more money," instead he says, "well done, good and faithful servant, you have been faithful with what I gave you." Of course the master would have been happy to have extra money but he was more pleased that his servants had been diligent in their work and invested the money, just as he would have done.

Then the last servant comes to his master and gives him back the talent he had received. His master is furious, "you lazy and wicked servant," he says. We may feel that this anger is unjustified. The servant gave back the money that had been entrusted to him. Investments are a risky way of making money and there is no guaranty that you will even get your own money back, let alone profit. This servant was just playing it safe and making sure that he didn't lose the money that was entrusted to him. But the master isn't worried about the money. He's angry because the servant didn't do what he should have done with the money. The master was a business man, he knew all about the gains and losses of investments. Sure he would have been disappointed if the servant had made poor investments

and loss all his money, but he would have been happy that the servant had at least tried. The master of this story is not greedy, he's not worried if his servants gained or lost the money through investments. He's angry with the last servant because he didn't even try to make more money. For this master, it is better to have tried and failed than never to have tried at all.

So what exactly is this parable about? Of course, it is about the Second Coming of Christ. The master going away is referring to the Ascension of Christ, and the master's return is the Return of Christ. But that is only the surface of this parable. The core of this parable is a message about faith and the use of faith.

The servants are humanity, the talents are faith, the investments are the living out of that faith or good works and the profits gained are converts to the faith. In Matthew 5:16 Jesus says, "*let your light shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in Heaven.*" Our good works are the living out of our faith, and those who see our good works may see the faith that in us and be won over to the faith. As St. Peter said in his First Epistle (3:1), "*wives, be subordinate to your own husbands, so that even if some do not obey the Word, they may be won over by the conduct of our wives, even without a word.*"

Like the talents, faith is given to us as a gift from our Master. He wants us to invest that gift, to live out the faith, to do good works and let our light before the world so that others may be won over to the faith. God expects us to serve Him and our neighbour, each according to our own ability. In Lutheranism we talk about service of God and neighbour within our given vocation; that is our place in life. You don't need to be a pastor or missionary or some form of Church worker to serve God. Each of us can and should serve God as we are able. If you're an employee then give glory to God to being an honest and trustworthy worker. If you're a father then give glory to God by looking after your children and raising them in the faith. If you're a wife then give glory to God by loving and caring for your husband. Whatever you are and wherever you are, let your light shine before men so that your good works may give glory to your Father in Heaven.

We have been justified by Christ's death, but we have also been sanctified by His death so that we may live out that faith in service of God and neighbour. We have been redeemed in order to walk in newness of life, to strive after holiness and to keep the Commandments of God.

St. James says that faith without works is dead (James 2:17). This is not to say that works grant salvation. What it means is that, as Martin Luther put it, good works follow faith, and that if good works do not follow, then the faith is false and not true (*Smalcald Articles* 3.13.2-3). Faith without works is not the faith that justifies. If a person says that they have faith and yet do not do good works, then they do not truly have faith. This is not because works save us, but because works are evidence of faith. Good works are an outward sign that a person has inward faith in Jesus, just as I said last week concerning the lamps of Ten Virgins. The flame was evidence that there was oil in the lamp. No flame meant no oil.

This is evident in the words themselves. The master calls the obedient servants faithful. Think about that word for a moment, faith-full, full of faith. Obedient servants are called faithful, they are full of faith, while disobedient servants are called faithless, they are without faith.

True faith is a living and active thing that cannot help but do good works. Therefore, if you claim you have faith but do not have works, then you do not actually have faith. As St. James says (2:14-16), if you claim to have to faith and yet when coming upon someone who is naked or hungry you do nothing to help them, then you don't have faith.

Now I am not saying that a keeping of the Law of God will save you. There's a difference between those who strive to lead a holy life and yet fall into sin and those who indulge in sinfulness. It is the latter that does not have true Christian faith.

Remember that the master was not pleased by the profit gained by the first two servants, but by their diligence to invest the money, and that his anger with the third servant was not over a lack of profit but because of the servant's failure and laziness to even try to invest the money. It is not our good works that please God but the faith behind those works. Without faith it is impossible to please God (Heb. 11:6), and that which does not come from faith is sin (Rom. 14:23).

Investments are risky, there was no guarantee that those servants would get back a profit, but they knew that their master expected them to invest that money, and so they did, faithfully believing that he would forgive them if they lost any of the money. The other servant was afraid to risk the money that was offered him. He was afraid that his master would be angry if he failed, so he didn't even try.

God gives to us faith, and He expects us to live out that faith. He wants us to keep His Law. But He also knows

that no matter how hard we try, we will fail. That is why He has already sent His only-begotten Son to die in our place and repaid all our sins. But there is a difference between those who strive to lead a holy life and fail and those who do not even try to keep the Law of God.

True faith sets us free from sin, while false faith uses that freedom as a license to sin. We are no longer slaves of sin but slaves of righteousness. We have been set free to walk in newness of life, to strive after holiness. God has not set us free from the Law but from the Law's condemnation and the Law's demand for perfection. Just as the master did not expect a profit, so too God does not expect perfection. Of course God is pleased when we keep His Commandments, just as the master was of course pleased by the additional money. But what is more important to God is that our good works are done in faith - that we trust in God as our Saviour, knowing that we can do the works of Law not as slaves but as freeman, knowing that God will forgive us when we fail.

Those who claim to have faith but do not have works do not know Christ as their Saviour. They may know God. They may call themselves Christian. They may even know that Jesus Christ died on the Cross to save humanity, but so what? As St. James said (2:19) who think you have faith because you believe that there is a God, so what? Even the demons believe in God, and they shudder in fear.

Those who do not have true faith, those who do not know Christ as their redeeming Saviour, only know God as judge. The faithful servants knew that their master would forgive them if they failed. But the lazy and wicked servant only knew his master to be a harsh man.

Faith is a gift that is given to us. There are people who think that as long as they give back to God the faith that He gave them, they will be fine. Just like the servant who thought that as long as he gave back the original talent the master would be happy. Just as the servant refused to invest the money, so too these people refuse to do good works. These are the people who don't strive to keep the Law of God and do not repent of their wickedness. They are lazy and wicked servants who think that God will just love and tolerate their sinful lives and accept them for who they are. As Zephaniah said (1:12) they say in their hearts, "the LORD will do neither good nor evil."

They call themselves Christian but they do not heed the Word of God. They indulge in sin and live a life of wickedness. God has set them free from the slavery of sin and yet they refuse this gift and instead wish to remain bound to sin. Just as the servants freely received the talents and yet the last servant refused to even bank the talent. Just as the bridegroom gave the Ten Virgins the oil as a free gift and yet the foolish ones refused to take it with them and use it in their lamps.

These people do not have a true faith in God. When their Master comes to them, He will rebuke them and call them lazy and wicked servants. The lazy servant in the parable blames the harshness of his master for his failure to invest the money. So too these "Christians" do not blame their own sinfulness and failure to keep the Law but they blame the Law itself for being too harsh. They claim that since God is loving, He can't possibly expect us to keep those Commandments. These people do not have faith.

Jesus closes this parable by saying that those who have will receive more, but to those who do not have, even what they have will be taken from them. Those who do not have faith will lose everything, even the blessings they have in this life will be taken away from them in the Final Judgement. They will be eternally separated from God and will have nothing.

But as for those who have faith, who believe in Christ as their Saviour, who trust in the forgiveness of God, and who use that trust to strive after holiness, who use that trust to come to Christ in repentance after they have failed, they know that God will have mercy on them. They will be given more and will receive blessings in abundance. The Lord will come to them and say, "well done, good and faithful servant, with little you were faithful, I will put you in charge of much. Enter into the joy of your Lord."

Brother and sister in Christ, we are not in darkness, and the Day of the Lord will not overtake you as a thief. You are sons of light and sons of the day. We are not of the night or of darkness. For God did not appoint us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that we should live together with Him. (1 Thess. 5:4-5,9-10) Amen.

And may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen.