

Psalm 15

Who can live in your tent, LORD? Who can dwell on your holy mountain?

2 The person who lives free of blame, does what is right, and speaks the truth sincerely;

³ who does no damage with their talk, does no harm to a friend, doesn't insult a neighbor;

4 someone who despises those who act wickedly, but who honors those who honor the LORD; someone who keeps their promise even when it hurts;

⁵ someone who doesn't lend money with interest, who won't accept a bribe against any innocent person. Whoever does these things will never stumble.

Matthew 25:14-30

14 "The kingdom of heaven is like a man who was leaving on a trip. He called his servants and handed his possessions over to them. 15 To one he gave five valuable coins,[a] and to another he gave two, and to another he gave one. He gave to each servant according to that servant's ability. Then he left on his journey.

16 "After the man left, the servant who had five valuable coins took them and went to work doing business with them. He gained five more. 17 In the same way, the one who had two valuable coins gained two more. 18 But the servant who had received the one valuable coin dug a hole in the ground and buried his master's money.

19 "Now after a long time the master of those servants returned and settled accounts with them. 20 The one who had received five valuable coins came forward with five additional coins. He said, 'Master, you gave me five valuable coins. Look, I've gained five more.'

21 "His master replied, 'Excellent! You are a good and faithful servant! You've been faithful over a little. I'll put you in charge of much. Come, celebrate with me.'

22 "The second servant also came forward and said, 'Master, you gave me two valuable coins. Look, I've gained two more.'

23 "His master replied, 'Well done! You are a good and faithful servant. You've been faithful over a little. I'll put you in charge of much. Come, celebrate with me.'

24 "Now the one who had received one valuable coin came and said, 'Master, I knew that you are a hard man. You harvest grain where you haven't sown. You gather crops where you haven't spread seed. 25 So I was afraid. And I hid my valuable coin in the ground. Here, you have what's yours.'

26 "His master replied, 'You evil and lazy servant! You knew that I harvest grain where I haven't sown and that I gather crops where I haven't spread seed? 27 In that case, you should have turned my money over to the bankers so that when I returned, you could give me what belonged to me with interest. 28 Therefore, take from him the valuable coin and give it to the one who has ten coins. 29 Those who have much will receive more, and they will have more than they need. But as for those who don't have

much, even the little bit they have will be taken away from them. 30 Now take the worthless servant and throw him outside into the darkness.'

"People there will be weeping and grinding their teeth.

Sermon

Grace to you and peace from God our Creator, our Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit: Amen.

The master has returned. The servants immediately rush to their quarters, grabbing the coins given to them by their boss, ensuring that he sees they've not lost what's been given. Or at least, that's the intent of the one who holds only one coin in his hand, probably beaming, almost giddy as he wipes the dirt off of the coin that he just dug up. That all changes, though, as the others come back. His countenance falls because they don't just have the coins they received. They've got more. They've doubled what they were given. They didn't hide the valuable pieces given to them by their Lord, but risked it, put it to use, and give their master something they know he desires. How ridiculous that seemed when they first received their gifts, except it worked. There they all are, cash in hand, standing and

preparing for judgement. The two who invested hear “You’ve been faithful over a little. I’ll put you in charge of much. Come, celebrate with me,” while the one who hid hears only scorn and disappointment.

When we interpret Jesus’s parables, we must remember that every detail has meaning, and at the same time, that every metaphor has its limits. In other words, these important details aren’t about the surface meaning, because parables aren’t meant to have simple interpretation. For instance, at first glance we might think that the point of this parable is the production of money, that God wants us to use our gifts to become wealthier, just to fill the coffers of the church. Yet, that doesn’t seem to mesh with the rest of what we know about Jesus. When Jesus uses parables, he uses themes common to the culture of 1st century Judaism and the Greco-Roman Empire to magnify points of importance far beyond these worldly

concerns. In other words, Jesus is using this story of a harsh, money-focused master – something his listeners would almost certainly have understood – to prove a different point. The key to this story isn't how much money we earn, but whether we faithfully use and share the gifts God's given to us.

That's what sets apart the evil and lazy servant from the others. Rather than employ the coin in a way consistent with the master's identity, he instead hoards the coin in fear of losing it for the master. God doesn't give us things to hide them under a bushel or bury them in the ground. God gives us things that we might put them to good use, that we might be faithful with what we're given, that they might bring new life.

Think about it this way. When the master gave the servants these coins, he knew full well he might lose them. That's why they're given according to the servants' abilities.

The master could have very well put the coins in the bank himself before he left and earned interest on them. Instead, the master models the behavior he expects from the servants. Don't just hide what you have, but instead take a risk with it and share it with others. Put the things that we have in our care to good use, and return them to the Lord with new life.

We, like the servants, are also called to give the Lord more of the things God desires, but let's be clear. God is no ordinary master. God doesn't want a financial return on the investment. God wants us to use the things that we're given faithfully. God offers us gifts with a deep desire to see them multiply, to see us invest the wonderful things we're given in ways that bear fruit for God's Kingdom in the world.

We're coming to a point as a community where we must take stock of the gifts God has given us, the coins placed in our care, and ask how best to steward them

faithfully. When we talk about these gifts, we've got to cast a wide net and consider the extent of God's generosity in our lives. We likely first begin with the financial resources held in common by our congregation and our own individual assets, because much like the world of Jesus's parable, money remains incredibly valuable in our culture.

We must of course remember that all the money we have comes as a gift from God. But there's so many other things that we receive from God. Our skills, whether in the garden or in sports and music or in relationships or in our occupations, all of our skills are gifts from God. The same is true of the time that we have, the homes where we live, the spaces we inhabit, the bodies with which we encounter the world every single day, these are all God's gifts. God's given these things to us, each according to our personal abilities, and called us to use them in ways that honor God and reflects God's identity.

So, brass tax, what does that mean? It first means that if we're hiding or hoarding those gifts, then we're doing it wrong. The things that we have, we have for a reason, and that reason is to use them. If we bury the treasure given to us by God, then we're just covering the gold of heaven with the dirt of the earth. Hiding the gifts God's given us may reveal a number of things. Perhaps it's distrust of God, shame in ourselves, or fear of others, but in the face of all those temptations, God calls us to take heart, to have courage, to make the risk of using the gifts we have.

And make no mistake, God expects something out of this use: attempts at fruitfulness and faithfulness. In the parable, the master celebrated the servants who doubled the money he left in their care. In a parable, this isn't about profit; instead, it's that their coins gave birth to new coins. They used their gifts to give life to other gifts. The same is true for the gifts God's given us. God expects our gifts to be life

giving. Perhaps this means using our talents of knitting or sewing, of gardening or crafts, to help others in need of work learn how to create sustainable incomes and occupations for themselves. Maybe we could even build raised beds on our property to help provide outdoor classrooms for students to learn what it's like to grow their own foods and provide healthy sustenance. Perhaps this means sponsoring a scholarship contest for students in Radford to foster creativity and innovation in solving the problems that face our world. Perhaps this means finding a way to get access to and use the abandoned Head Start building at the bottom of the hill to provide affordable, safe childcare in our area. The resources in our neighborhood, whether skills or monies or buildings, are meant to bring more life, divine life, into Radford.

These might seem like a lot, but they're things that we can do together if we put our gifts to God's good use.

Perhaps it might help if we learn to take a risk on our own first, using something of a smaller value. That's why I'm giving each of you a dollar. Now, I've seen pastors do this before and expect you to return next week with a profit, as though that was the point of the story. By now, you should know that this isn't the purpose of the parable. I don't expect you to simply use this dollar just to make money. I hope that you will turn this dollar into new life. That could mean earning more dollars for a different purpose, but it could also mean giving this away so that others might experience grace, generosity, or relief. God gives us things that might bear fruit. Our gifts are meant to bear life.

So what I want is for you to take this dollar, put it to good use, and then share with one another how you used it. Here's a very important caveat: don't just put it in the offering plate! There's meant to be a risk involved with this, so take this dollar away. Perhaps you'll bring it back with

more in the next weeks or months with a purpose of giving others life through one of our outreach ministries, or starting a new ministry! Or perhaps you'll come back having given it away to someone whose needed a sign of life in the world. Coming back empty-handed isn't failure. If your hands are empty because you used what was in them to give someone else life, then it's faithfulness.

What I hope is that, in the next few weeks, you'll share with one another and with me how you used that dollar to offer a taste of new life in our world. Perhaps you'll meet someone who's in need of a meal. Use this dollar and give them life. Perhaps you'll see an opportunity to put your dollars together and buy some items to donate or sell in benefit of our partners likes Beans and Rice or the Women's Resource Center. In whatever way you use this, use it to bring life. Just be sure you don't hide it! Don't bury it in your wallet, but instead buy a treat for someone who's having a

rough day. Don't forget about it your car, but instead invest it in one of the local nonprofits. You can even pool your dollars together for something. Maybe there's something you can't do with just your dollar, but if other people pitched in, or if you invested some more of your own money, then it could bring even more life.

And that's the truth of all our gifts as Christians. There's so much that we can't do on our own, so rather than ask for help or take a risk, we bury our gifts. Don't. Just don't. Instead, be courageous and ask for help. If you're trying to bring abundant life to God's people, God's creation, then it's surely worth the risk. Not only will you discover the gifts that others bring, but you'll see your own gifts grow as they're honed by people who love you and want to see more life in the world. God gives us these gifts to use them, to bring new life. Let's put more than just these dollars to work. Amen.