

PARABLES: Minas and Rewards
Luke 19

It's Labor Day weekend, so I thought we could look at a parable that relates to labor and stewardship of labor. There are two similar parables – Matt 25 and Luke 19 – that deal with the topic, but they also deal with much more.

CAVEAT: IN OUR highly politicized day, some would take these parables to try to make a political or economic policy statement. BEWARE of what you ask for. Ultimately neither side would like the implications of these parables were they to be turned into public policy.

Luke 19

Blind Beggar and Zacchaeus come before – Triumphal Entry follows

11 While they were listening to these things, Jesus went on to tell a parable, because He was near Jerusalem, and they supposed that the kingdom of God was going to appear immediately.

12 So He said, "A nobleman went to a distant country to receive a kingdom for himself, and then return. 13 And he called ten of his slaves, and gave them ten minas and said to them, 'Do business with this until I come back.' 14 But his citizens hated him and sent a delegation after him, saying, 'We do not want this man to reign over us.'

15 When he returned, after receiving the kingdom, he ordered that these slaves, to whom he had given the money, be called to him so that he might know what business they had done. 16 The first appeared, saying, 'Master, your mina has made ten minas more.' 17 And he said to him, 'Well done, good slave, because you have been faithful in a very little thing, you are to be in authority over ten cities.'

18 The second came, saying, 'Your mina, master, has made five minas.' 19 And he said to him also, 'And you are to be over five cities.' 20 Another came, saying, 'Master, here is your mina, which I kept put away in a handkerchief; 21 for I was afraid of you, because you are an exacting man; you take up what you did not lay down and reap what you did not sow.' 22 He *said to him, 'By your own words I will judge you, you worthless slave. Did you know that I am an exacting man, taking up what I did not lay down and reaping what I did not sow? 23 Then why did you not put my money in the bank, and having come, I would have collected it with interest?'

24 Then he said to the bystanders, 'Take the mina away from him and give it to the one who has the ten minas.' 25 And they said to him, 'Master, he has ten minas already.' 26 'I tell you that to everyone who has, more shall be given, but from the one who does not have, even what he does have shall be taken away. 27 But these enemies of mine, who did not want me to reign over them, bring them here and slay them in my presence.' "

THE LEAD – there are consequences to what we do or fail to do with the opportunities and resources that God has given us. This would include our labor and time, talent, and treasure.

Note the CONTEXT 19:11 Their approach to Jerusalem and their expectations of the immediate appearance of the kingdom of God.

There are varying opinions about what is intended by the reference to the far country and the masters return, it seems to indicate that Jesus was seeking to refute the idea that the kingdom would appear when Jesus got to Jerusalem. (Snodgrass p. 851). The king was about to enter the city, but the kingdom was not yet revealed in its fullness. We live in the 'now and not yet'.

Also we should note the CURRENT EVENTS FOR THE ORIGINAL AUDIENCE

Herod the Great who had received his kingship by making a trip to Rome. After that, his son, Archelaus, went to Rome hoping to be crowned king but he was opposed by a delegation that also traveled to Rome. Archelaus had already killed some who opposed his being named the new king after the death of Herod. So, some opponents went to argue against him receiving the kingdom. The parable is something of a current event.

THE PARABLE IS NOT comparing Jesus to Archelaus. The focus is on those who got a similar deposit and whether they were faithful stewards of what was entrusted to them. For us it is a 'gospel deposit' entrusted to us, i.e. living out our faith.

Hearing the gospel is a privilege but also a responsibility, and we will be held accountable for what we do with the message. – Klyne Snodgrass p. 842 Stories with Intent

Philip Ryken – “We put the gospel to work by living out our regular calling in ways that show the supremacy of Christ. The worker can do this with his labor, the professor with his scholarship, the lawyer with his justice – in parenting, in marriage, in legal recreation, in art, science, engineering, waiting tables or being in the service industry, driving on backroads or the interstate, etc - As long as it is done with an intention of bringing glory to God, everything we do can be an investment in the kingdom of God.” 1 Cor 10:31 – ‘whether you eat or drink, do all to the glory of God.’”

v. 12 “a far or distant county’ indicates that the ruler will be gone for a while.

Jesus wants his disciples to be ready for his extended absence and be ready for wise faithful service while he is gone.

v. 26-27 and Matt 25:28-30 are rather startling to us are they not?

When people say, “I really have no problem with Jesus, it’s just Christians that I don’t like” my guess is that they’ve never read these texts from Matthew and Luke, along with numerous other parts of the gospel. There are books written on ‘the hard sayings of Jesus’ i.e. sayings that many would find offensive. But I digress.

In the past I’ve referred to the issue of ‘rewards’ in heaven. It came up to some degree in the series on Revelation and in some degree with some of the parables. HERE it comes up to a MUCH greater degree.

The motive of a reward is a central aspect of the parable for all who heard - from the original audience to us today 2000 years later.

NOTE: THE CHARACTERS IN THE story did not have a promise of future reward. The reward issue would have been a takeaway for those hearing the parable.

There is a passage in Luke 12 that speaks of judgement and punishment for wrongdoers in which some receive many stripes while others receive fewer.

We have an easier time with that because we have our own system or hierarchy of evil and we have the belief that the punishment should fit the crime.

The controversy here in Luke 19/ Matt 25 is the varying degrees of reward for those who were faithful. This seems odd to us, or it does to me.

What about free grace and justification is equal for all?

Aren’t all believers equally righteous in Christ by grace alone through faith alone?

Does the idea of rewards introduce some sort of meritorious work into our salvation?

Those are valid questions and concerns.

It is also valid to note that if Jesus is teaching that rewards are in play in some way, then we can’t automatically discount what he is saying. My guess is that many of you have read other passages that speak to the issue of rewards and have pondered some of the same questions.

I will note that Jesus is in line with the 5th commandment – Deut 5

16‘Honor your father and your mother, as the Lord your God has commanded you, that your days may be prolonged and that it may go well with you on the land which the Lord your God gives you.

Eph 6 repeats this...

1 Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. 2 Honor your father and mother (which is the first

commandment with a promise), 3 so that it may be well with you, and that you may live long on the earth.

KIDS, do you hear this? THE FIRST COMMAND WITH A PROMISE (reward) IS GIVEN TO YOU.

What that means is that if you don't honor your parents, it's not really an issue of your relationship with them. It is an issue of your relationship with God. It also means that you are turning your back on the promise/reward that is offered.

It is a vertical issue with God before it is a horizontal issue with someone else.

That is true for ALL OF US IN OUR relationships where we fail to honor and love one another, whether we are child, parent, single, colleagues, teammates, friends, competitors, fellow members of the body of Christ.

The parables of Luke 19 and Matt 25 remind us that we are waiting for the Master to return, and we should be diligent in the tasks that He has given us. The parable of the Ten Virgins with the lampstands has a similar message – We need to be found ready for when the Master returns.

God has also given us His good instruction for our own benefit so that we might grow in wisdom and godliness. Those are good things, and they are good for us.

We may downplay rewards because by doing so we cover for our own laziness – temporal or spiritual.

"It's ok if I'm not a diligent steward because, hey, we'll all get to heaven, and it will be fine."

True, it will be fine, but if the distinctions that Jesus gives aren't important in some way, why would He talk about it? If the sense of rewards are not legit, why does Jesus speak of them? The love or gratitude motivation might lull us into a false sense of the eternal stakes involved in this life.

"God loves me no matter what, so I can coast in this life, no big deal."

Instead of "close enough for government work", we might think, 'close enough for God, after all, I'm saved by grace.'

There is nothing in the biblical understanding of grace that is an excuse for laziness be it temporal or spiritual laziness. When rightly understood and experienced, grace becomes a motivation to diligence.

Jesus knows that the prospect of an eternal reward will motivate us to take our task as stewards more seriously. The teaching such as this in Luke 19 or Matt 25 reminds us that THIS LIFE COUNTS for eternity. How we live now has eternal consequences.

Should rewards be necessary? In one sense, NO. Given all that Christ has done for us we should have plenty of motivation to serve him, full stop.

But the reality is that WE ARE motivated by rewards, or shall we say, "self-interest". And given the number of times that Jesus refers to such a motivation, it not a bad thing. That is why Jesus tells parables that feature rewards in the plot line. REWARDS ARE A GOOD THING, and they motivate us toward godly behavior, faithful service for kingdom values, works of love and charity, and even evangelism.

EX: "Lose your crown" - Over the years as a Christian I've heard people talk about losing their crown of reward if they tell others of the good things they've done in secret. Honestly, I think we sort of joke like that because we were not really clear or comfortable about the topic of rewards. That's ok.

It's not a clearly spelled out doctrine, and there's no chapter on rewards in the WCF

While our confession doesn't treat the subject with its own chapter, theologians have tried to synthesize the various aspects of the Biblical teaching on rewards. I applaud them for applying their biblically informed minds to the task of explaining what it all might mean.

<https://christianity.stackexchange.com/questions/15182/how-did-reformed-theologians-view-works-based-heavenly-rewards>

John Calvin says of Matthew 16:27 ("For the Son of man will come in the glory of his Father with his angels: and then will he render to every one according to his actions"):

When a reward is promised to good works, their merit is not contrasted with the justification which is freely bestowed on us through faith; nor is it pointed out as the cause of our salvation, but is only held out to excite believers to aim at doing what is right, by assuring them that their labor will not be lost. There is a perfect agreement, therefore, between these two statements, that we are justified freely, (Romans 3:24,) because we are received into God's favor without any merit; and yet that God, of his own good pleasure, bestows on our works a reward which we did not deserve.

Rewards are certainly NOT the sole or even prime motivation for believers. The central core motivation is thankfulness or gratitude. We love Him who first loved us.

"Love so amazing so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all", even if there are no rewards per se.

As Thomas Bolton, another Puritan, who in his classic work *The True Bounds of Christian Freedom*, spoke of the motivation of reward not as the supreme reason for a Christian's obedience but more as "refreshments [along] the way, not the "mainspring of [a Christian's] motion, but "oil to the wheels..." [192-193]

There are some sober words of warning that sound harsh and un-Jesus like, or so we think. It is not the first or last place that Jesus and the Bible speak in ways that might shock us. Remember that parables are often told to shock the hearer to take a truth or warning seriously. Parabolic language is not designed to be the basis for our systematic theology, it does clue us in to what is important.

This is a serious warning to those who hear it, but let us NOT FORGET that before any final judgement falls on the Enemies of the ruler, the hand of judgement fell on Christ on behalf of sinners.

While we were enemies and hostile toward God, Jesus gave His life for us. He took the judgement that we deserved. Jesus is the one who is slaughtered which makes the warning all the more important. Don't ignore the free gift of salvation.

***APPLY

As we live in this now but not yet period waiting for Christ to return, this parable and other passages speak to our motivation as we live in light of eternity in our labor and our stewardship.

Scripture gives input on the value of work and how we should approach our work:

Eph 6: 5 Slaves, be obedient to those who are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in the sincerity of your heart, as to Christ; 6 not by way of eyeservice, as men-pleasers, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart. 7 With good will render service, as to the Lord, and not to men, 8 knowing that whatever good thing each one does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether slave or free.

Col 3:17 Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father.

Col 3, Eph 5 These principles transformed the world and gave us the Protestant Work Ethic. When applied to our own lives, these truths will change us.

EX: me in college

As long as our work is not immoral or illegal, it should be done as unto the Lord. If it is routine or glamorous, it should be done unto the Lord.

If we are paid for it or we are volunteers or it is simply the necessary chores around the house, we should do it as unto the Lord.

If we are students, teachers, employees, employers, or retirees, we should do it as unto the Lord.

If we are single, husbands, wives, parents, or children, we should fill our role as unto the Lord.

Samuel Chadwick, a nineteenth-century Methodist pastor, recalled a story about John Newton who commented

that if he had shined shoes, he would have labored as the best shiner of shoes in his village, because he would have shined the shoes for Jesus. This lesson captured Chadwick's attention, because one of his weekly chores at home—the one he hated the most—was shining his father's shoes. The next morning, he set about the task with his father's shoes before him. He finished shining a pair, put them down, and looked at them. Then he remembered the words of Newton. Chadwick thought to himself, "I wonder if those boots would look good on the feet of Jesus Christ?" He then said:

For answer I took up the boots and began again. It was a simple thing to do, but I believe . . . that it was the most important thing I ever did in my life. . . . I got in the habit of doing the simplest duties as unto, and for, Jesus Christ.

Our attitude and behavior, when it comes to work, is a spiritual issue. Work is a part of the creation mandate – God gave Adam and Eve a job in the garden. Work was a God thing way before it is a Union or Right to Work thing. Work as a good God-honoring thing comes in the earliest chapters of Genesis.

Jason Helopoulos

The Christian seeks to do all for Christ. The love of Christ, this extraordinary love, controls us. This means that we want to do the right things in the right way at the right time. Laziness does not always come in the form of idleness. At times, we will engage in something that isn't necessarily bad, but in so doing we might avoid what we are supposed to do. Whatever the Lord sets on our plate in any given moment in every realm of our lives, we should desire to do, to His glory. Laziness must find no safe harbor in the Christian life if we are going to live for Christ.

<https://tabletalkmagazine.com/article/2023/05/laziness/>

Col 3

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