

The Unfair Master
November 19, 2023
Matthew 25:14-30

“It will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted to them his property. To one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability.”

Dear friends in Christ,

The master of the household doesn't give equal shares to his servants. One gets five talents of money. One gets two and one gets one. He gives according to their ability. They're all equally his servants. They're all equally in the household. But while the master is away, they have different abilities and responsibilities; so the master has different expectations for each one.

Our Lord Jesus Christ has ascended into heaven and He's coming back in glory. This is the “journey” of the parable. As Christians, you are all equally His servants. You are equally in the household of God. You are equally forgiven, for the blood of Jesus Christ cleanses all of you from all your sin. In the meantime, as you await His return, He has different callings and plans for each of you. And because He gives you certain callings and responsibilities, He entrusts you with various things to get the job done. It's all part of the plan to keep the world in order and the body of Christ going until the Last Day.

We sinners take this truth and interpret it with a glass-half-empty attitude. We sum it up this way: life isn't fair. That's true enough. In God's design, He gives different daily bread to different people. This applies to all sorts of things. Some will have more money and others will have less. Some will have more talent and others will have less. Some will have mechanical skills and some will not. Some will have profound athleticism, while others will be uncoordinated. Some will be beautiful and some will not. Some will have an engaging personality and great conversational skills, while others may struggle to say hello. Some will be given many years of life in this world; some will not. Life isn't fair. God doesn't make us identical, but gives us various gifts. Together, we are the body of Christ. Some will be kneecaps and some will be eyes.

Different people will have different callings for the good of all.

Life isn't fair, and different people are different because God made them that way. This is hardly profound, but it's part of the parable. We can add this, too: to whom much is given, much will be expected. If God has given you much, you are a steward of much and called to exercise that stewardship faithfully. If you are blessed with abundant wealth, then it is given to you to use that wealth wisely. If it is abundant talent, then it is given to you to make use of that talent according to God's will. The same is true for whatever God gives you for use in this life— strength, brains, beauty, music, whatever. It's given to be used within your callings in service to others, and in service to God.

This should be good news. This should all be a great comfort from this parable. For one thing, you're already in the house—you're not trying to earn your way in. You're part of the household of faith, not because of what you've done with what you've got, but because Jesus has already redeemed you. What you have is given by God: He's not running a talent search to see who has the right stuff to buy

or sing or dance or run or think his way into the kingdom of heaven. You're already in for Jesus' sake. That's Good News.

God has given you what you need to accomplish what you need to do. This doesn't always mean that things will go easily according to your plan. They might be very difficult, as the Lord teaches you to trust in Him, not just the abilities He's given. There will be failures along the way, for every parent knows that children also learn by failing and falling; your Father in heaven knows this, too. There will also be times when you learn what you're not suited for, how God's gifts to you don't match up with what you were hoping to do. This, by the way, is what makes the teenage years so frustrating for so many: as youth continue to mature and face impending adulthood, they need to try different opportunities to discover how best to be of service to others with their talents and skills. Not every venture will go well—even when it's not a matter of right or wrong, and it sometimes means an embarrassing fall on the face. It's part of discovering what God has shaped you to do, and not to do.

But overall, isn't this all comforting good news? You belong to the Lord for Jesus' sake. Until His return, He has plans for you. Because He has different plans for different people, He gives different talents and gifts to different people. All of this is designed for the good of all, as each uses what he has—and who he is—in service to those around him.

But here's the rub. As sinners, we don't see God's careful planning and entrusting as wise or good. Instead, we often resent it as terribly unfair. We are seldom happy with who we are; better put, we are seldom happy with who God has made us to be.

Rather than give thanks for what you are by God's design, you'll be tempted to focus on what you aren't. Dissatisfaction and discontent are two big temptations for the devil. God makes you smart, but you would rather be strong. God makes you musical, but you'd rather be smart. God makes you athletic, but you'd rather be better looking. God gives you wit, but you'd rather have wealth. God gives you wisdom and experience, but you'd rather have youth and bravado.

So not only will you be dissatisfied with who you are, but in jealousy you may also resent who others are—who God has made others to be.

And when people do find something about themselves that they like, what is the temptation? Pride. Rather than give thanks to God for the gift and use it in service to others, the big temptation will be to use that in service to yourself, to gather recognition, power, wealth and a sense of superiority.

Or you may not want to use the talents that you have, reasoning that to do so would take too much time or be embarrassing or below your status.

Or it can go this way, too, since the devil has a deep bag of tricky temptations: you'll be tempted to covet especially what the world glorifies, which may not be at all the greatest gifts for service in the household of faith. Physical beauty and strength are placed on pedestals in this world, where models and athletes are worshiped like gods and goddesses. But how far can you translate beauty and athleticism into service to your fellow man? Both are terribly subject to abuse: those who have them are constantly tempted to use them to build their up their own pride and ego. Riches are another great idol of the world, an attractive god, even though the worshipers of mammon are usually a

miserable lot. Compared to beauty, athleticism and wealth, I'll take integrity, honor and compassion in people any day of the week. But you and I will be tempted to covet those showy things every day.

All of this is true, and it's not good. But none of this pride or resentment or jealousy or discontent or coveting is the most serious facet of the sin.

The most serious facet is this: to resent who you are, or to resent what God has entrusted to your stewardship, is to accuse God. It is to accuse God of messing up in what He has given. It is to say that He isn't wise, that He doesn't know what He's doing. It accuses God of being untrustworthy. That is where discontent leads—to the accusation that God is not to be trusted, that He's not compassionate. What next? When a sinner thinks that God is not compassionate, then he concludes that God is a hard master. A sinner isn't going to want to serve a God like that. Resenting all that God has done for him, he'll harden his heart and deny that God has given him anything. That's what happens to the servant with the one talent in the parable. He's the only one who thinks the master is hard, and so he does nothing with what the master has given him. By failing to use what the master has entrusted to him, he's effectively saying, "I don't want to be your servant anymore."

That is where the devil's temptations ultimately lead. That's the goal, to get you to resent God's gifts for you and others until you say, "This is a hard God. I don't want to be His anymore." It is not God who has become hard, but your heart. At that point, throwing away all of His gifts including forgiveness, you're opting for outer darkness, for weeping and gnashing of teeth.

So, what's the solution? It's not just looking at the glass as half-full rather than half-empty, nor is it working to be more thankful and helpful. No, the solution is repentance.

Repentance begins with contrition. It begins with confessing resentment towards God for what He hasn't given you and for what He has given to others. It includes confessing envy, jealousy, coveting, thanklessness and discontent, along with all other sins that would lead you to doubt God's mercy, to see Him as a hard master for opposing your sinful will, and make you think that leaving His household is a good idea.

But repentance doesn't end with contrition. It moves on to absolution—it moves on to hearing that you are forgiven for all of these sins because of what Jesus has done.

And here is what Jesus has done for you. For you and for your salvation, He came down from heaven and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary, and was made man. According to His human nature, He became a specific person with a specific appearance—and, says Isaiah, an unremarkable appearance at that. According to His human nature, He took on weaknesses and frailties of man. He could be weary, hungry, sad...bruised and wounded. But rather than resent those limitations or envy others, He remained without sin, using His humanity fully in service to those around Him—and fully in service to all the world.

That service led Him to the cross. There, He was the object of sinful man's wrath. Envy His righteousness, coveting His power, resenting His holiness and their own sinfulness, they sought His death by the cruelest of means. He submitted to that—not because He was powerless against them, but because He was there to suffer God's judgment for sin. For theirs. For yours.

Risen again, your Savior comes to you. By His Word and Supper, He continues to forgive you all of your sins, keeping you clothed in His righteousness and strengthened in the one true faith. Because of His cross and His grace, you can be sure of this: it is God who made you to be who you are. It is God who has entrusted you with gifts and abilities for service, and it is God who still preserves you and your stewardship. He uses your strengths and your weaknesses for your good, as well as the good of others.

Because of the cross, you can be certain that God works this for your good, and not for evil. Because of the cross, you're set free from resentment and envy and discontent and the rest of those temptations that would harden your heart toward outer darkness. And when you're tempted again, you repent again; and His grace is sufficient.

Dear friends, rejoice. The Lord has made you who you are for service where He has placed you. Until He comes again, that means that there will be inequality in the eyes of man. But what the world calls inequality, the Lord calls suitability—indeed, He has suited and equipped you for the things He would have you do in service to your neighbor and in service to Him. And while those gifts may be various and unequal in our eyes for service in this world, His grace is the same for all—sufficient for salvation. In other words, no matter what the Lord has entrusted to you for this life—great or small, you can be sure of this: you are forgiven for all of your sins. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.