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# Stewardship in God's Kingdom

## Matthew 25:14-30

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### Introduction

The word servant, or bondservant in the New Testament is also the word most often used for slave. The Greek definition is, “pertaining to a state of being completely controlled by someone or something-subservient to, controlled by.” Slavery in the Roman Empire was simply a fact of life, and in the world at that time no one could have envisioned a world without slavery. The life of a slave depended on the temperament of the master, and many slaves sought out a life of slavery because the standard of living and security of life could be much better than trying to earn a living as a freeman. Slaves were often better educated than their masters and were often skilled laborers such as teachers and tutors, bookkeepers and estate managers. Paul described himself in Romans 1:1 as a “slave of Jesus Christ”, as a sign of pure devotion to Christ.

In the reality of our slavery to Christ we are called to be stewards. We are not the owners of our lives, or who and what we are. We are not self-made men, we are not called to pursue power, wealth and fame. We are not called to advance and grow our own personal kingdoms. We are called to steward the gospel and the kingdom of God.

In the final judgment believer and non-believers will be separated; believer's on Christ's right and non-believers on his left. Both will be judged on what they did and didn't do with the lowliest of believers. If you are a follower of Christ, you are living in two kingdoms. Which kingdom do you love the most? Or which kingdom do you focus your time and attention? Where do you spend most of your time, money and resources? What does God expect us to do with our lives? Where does God expect us to focus our time, money and talents?

## A Long Journey and Responsibilities Given (Matthew 25:14-30)

### Parables of the Kingdom

One of the things I really love about the book of Matthew are the parables on the Kingdom of Heaven woven through most of the book. Jesus often tells these parables for everyone to hear, crowds and Pharisees alike. He also explains to the disciples that he tells parables so everyone won't fully understand, and often Jesus has to explain to them the meaning of the parables. In this setting Jesus is sitting on the Mount of Olives and his disciples approach him and ask him when the end of time will take place (Matthew 24:3), and when will He return.

### The Coming of the Son of Man

These last two parables take place within the context of the end of time with Jesus explaining many of the signs and events that will take place before his second coming. Jesus tells the disciples signs of the end of the age, and generally what will have to take place before Jesus will return. One of the key things that Jesus tells the disciples is that (v. 14), the Good News about the Kingdom will be preached throughout the whole world, so that all nations will hear it; and then the end will come. Matthew also

describes the Abomination of Desolation, the persecution of the disciples and followers of Christ, the great tribulation, and then the Son of Man returning to earth after the tribulation and sending the angels out with a loud trumpet sound to gather the elect from one end of heaven to the other. Even though Jesus describes events that have to take place at the end of time, he emphasizes that no one knows the time and the place that he will return (not even Jesus himself), but only the father knows.

## Readiness is the key

Jesus uses these parables to challenge the disciples to prepare and remain ready for the Son of Man to return. Jesus tells the disciples in Matthew 24:42 <sup>42</sup>“So you, too, must keep watch! For you don’t know what day your Lord is coming... Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom his master has set over his household, to give them their food at the proper time? <sup>46</sup>Blessed is that servant whom his master will find so doing when he comes. <sup>47</sup>Truly, I say to you, he will set him over all his possessions. <sup>48</sup>But if that wicked servant says to himself, ‘My master is delayed,’ <sup>49</sup>and begins to beat his fellow servants and eats and drinks with drunkards, <sup>50</sup>the master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he does not know <sup>51</sup>and will cut him in pieces and put him with the hypocrites. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. (Matthew 24:45-51)

The parable we are going to look at today is the Parable of the Three Servants (NLT), or the Parable of the Talents (ESV),

<sup>14</sup> “Again, the Kingdom of Heaven can be illustrated by the story of a man going on a long trip. He called together his servants and entrusted his money to them while he was gone. <sup>15</sup> He gave five bags of silver to one, two bags of silver to another, and one bag of silver to the last—dividing it in proportion according to their abilities. He then left on his trip. (Matthew 25: 14-15)

In this parable, the kingdom of heaven is illustrated by a story of a man going on a long trip who entrusted his money to three of his servants. The master doesn’t give them specific instructions other than the money he gave them was their responsibility. The master divides up his money according to what the master believes is the individual ability of each of his servants, and then departs on a long journey.

### The Work Begins (Matthew 25:16-18)

<sup>16</sup> “The servant who received the five bags of silver began to invest the money and earned five more. <sup>17</sup> The servant with two bags of silver also went to work and earned two more. <sup>18</sup> But the servant who received the one bag of silver dug a hole in the ground and hid the master’s money.

### A Sharp Contrast

There is a sharp contrast between how the first two servants managed the money that was entrusted to them compared to how the last servant failed to manage his portion of the master's assets. According to the ESV the first servant went and traded with his portion and doubled the amount he was given. The second servant “went to work” with

his money and doubled his portion, but the third servant who was given one bag of silver dug a hole in the ground and buried the money he was given.

### **The Master Returns (Matthew 25:19-23)**

<sup>19</sup> “After a long time their master returned from his trip and called them to give an account of how they had used his money.

#### **Called to Give an Account (Matthew 25: 20-23)**

<sup>20</sup> The servant to whom he had entrusted the five bags of silver came forward with five more and said, ‘Master, you gave me five bags of silver to invest, and I have earned five more.’ <sup>21</sup> “The master was full of praise. ‘Well done, my good and faithful servant. You have been faithful in handling this small amount, so now I will give you many more responsibilities. Let’s celebrate together!’ <sup>22</sup> “The servant who had received the two bags of silver came forward and said, ‘Master, you gave me two bags of silver to invest, and I have earned two more.’ <sup>23</sup> “The master said, ‘Well done, my good and faithful servant. You have been faithful in handling this small amount, so now I will give you many more responsibilities. Let’s celebrate together!’

#### **Celebration and Greater Responsibilities**

After the master returns he calls his servants together and asks them to give an account for how they managed his money while he was gone. The first two servants present the master with the results of their work. The servant whom the master had given five bags of silver presented his master with double the amount of money he was given to manage. The servant who was given two bags of silver to manage also presented the master with double the amount he had been given. Both servants were commended equally, even though the first servant was given almost twice as much to manage. He then gives them each more responsibility to manage in his kingdom. It’s interesting that in the parallel story in Luke 19 it says that the servants were given ten cities and five cities to manage because of their success. A true servant who is serving well will be pleased when he is given more responsibility and excited when he is rewarded with more work to do for his master. He will be excited to be celebrated for a job well done, and anxious to get on to managing greater challenges and more difficult work.

#### **A Completely Different Attitude and Approach (Matthew 25:24-25)**

<sup>24</sup> “Then the servant with the one bag of silver came and said, ‘Master, I knew you were a harsh man, harvesting crops you didn’t plant and gathering crops you didn’t cultivate. <sup>25</sup> I was afraid I would lose your money, so I hid it in the earth. Look, here is your money back.’

#### **A Shocking Reply (Matthew 25:26-28)**

<sup>26</sup> “But the master replied, ‘You wicked and lazy servant! If you knew I harvested crops I didn’t plant and gathered crops I didn’t cultivate, <sup>27</sup> why didn’t you deposit my money in the bank? At least I could have gotten some interest on it.’ <sup>28</sup> “Then he ordered, ‘Take the money from this servant, and give it to the one with the ten bags of silver.’

## The Shocking Consequences

The last servant failed to recognize the intentions and desires of the master. Because of fear and uncertainty, fear of failing, and the fear of a harsh judgment the last servant only returned what he was given. Fear of a harsh punishment was the final servant's excuse not to act, which even kept him from accomplishing the minimum acceptable return (simple interest at the bank). To put the master's money with the bankers would have required very little effort on the part of the servant, and therefore was judged by the master as wicked and slothful. Ironically the servant feared harsh judgment, and in the end received what he feared. In God's kingdom, failing to act and refusing to work (simply maintaining the status quo) is unacceptable!

## The Story's Sad Conclusion (Matthew 25:29-30)

<sup>29</sup> To those who use well what they are given, even more will be given, and they will have an abundance. But from those who do nothing, even what little they have will be taken away.

<sup>30</sup> Now throw this useless servant into outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'

The last servant, according to D.A. Carson, was hoping to avoid doing anything wrong, he finished up in the end by not doing anything right and everything he had was taken away from him. Doing what is good and safe in our eyes will never save us from judgment.

## A Turning Point

One of the truths that "kingdom of heaven" parables show us is that believers and non-believers will exist together until the end of time. All three servants were given equal opportunity to manage what they had been given in such a way as to multiply their master's kingdom. The main point of this story for the disciples was that they were being called on to take the gospel into the world and expand Christ's kingdom. They should have heard the force of the story that the stewardship of the gospel was not an option but a command. This message is the same strong command to us as it was to the disciples. It is our responsibility as stewards to take the gospel into our neighborhoods and into the world to expand God's kingdom.

The first two servants represent believers who embrace the kingdom and work hard for the King and use their talents, gifts, money and resources to allow God to work and multiply the gifts and opportunities they have been given to take the gospel into the neighborhoods as God allows and multiplies the expansion of His Kingdom. It will be in this way that believers will prepare and be ready for the Master's return.

## The Third Steward

The disciples should have recognized a turning point in this parable and related the third servant to the Jewish people and particularly the Pharisees and religious teachers of Judaism. Up to this point in history the stewardship of the Law had fallen on the children of Israel and particularly the Scribes and Pharisees and other Jewish religious leaders, but in this parable the people of Israel and their religious leaders are described by the actions of the third and final servant. The Scribes and Pharisees didn't even do the minimal amount in the stewardship of God's Law, when they should have known the reality of the kingdom being lived out before them in the life of Christ. They had all the tools to understand the

truth about the kingdom, and they had been stewards of God's kingdom on earth for a very long time, and what was gained? For the people of Israel were living in confusion, darkness and unbelief because of the complete laziness and wickedness of the Jewish religious leaders.

## **New Stewards**

Now the growth and stewardship of the kingdom was being turned over to the disciples and future Christ-followers, it would no longer be dependent on the Judaic system and leadership of the Old Covenant. Jesus' soon to come crucifixion and the coming of the Holy Spirit will soon transition kingdom stewardship into the New Covenant reality. When Jesus had finished saying all these things, he said to his disciples, "As you know, Passover begins in two days, and the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified." And the new stewardship of the kingdom would begin.

## **Stewardship of the Kingdom Today**

So now we are stewards of the gospel. What does this mean? What does that look like for us today? If you have given your life to Christ as King and Lord, then you are a steward of the gospel and the Kingdom of God, and you will find yourself in this story. Jesus makes it clear in this parable that stewardship and working to expand the kingdom of God is not optional. Kingdom stewardship should define your whole life.

### **The Creator is the Owner**

To begin with, the book of Genesis tells us that God is the creator of the universe and is the owner of everything he created. God created the earth and he created man to have dominion over the earth and to be the steward of the earth, and to be held accountable for the management of every living thing (Genesis 1:26-28). God placed Adam and Eve in the Garden for what purpose? God placed Adam in the garden to work the garden and keep it (to maintain the garden and to manage it). From the very beginning of creation we were created to work and manage God's property.

Man is still the steward of the earth, but now in the New Covenant, followers of Christ are responsible for the proclamation of the gospel and through that proclamation, the growth of the kingdom of heaven.

### **Preparing for Christ's Return**

Our stewardship of the gospel is the way we work and prepare for Christ's return. It is a story of readiness and diligent preparation.

### **Defining Kingdom Work**

There is a clear thread of kingdom living through the book of Matthew that informs us of our responsibilities that crescendos at the end of Matthew in the Great Commission. Stewarding and growing the kingdom means making disciples. Going into all the world (wherever God places us), preaching, teaching and baptizing in the name of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. That is our stewardship. That is what our Master has entrusted to us.

## Unique Gifts and Responsibilities

God has given each of us a measure of grace and unique giftedness in which to spread and live out the gospel within our God-given abilities.

Which servant in this parable does your life reflect? Are you pushing the boundaries of kingdom expansion through your grace-enabled giftedness, or have you buried your silver in the back yard while you rest and pursue competing passions? Or are you intentional with your time, talents and resources about worshipping and glorifying God and making disciples (within the unique giftedness that God has provided)? Are you taking calculated risk with what God has given you, so that you can not only bear fruit, but compound that fruit 30, 60, or 100 times?

Are you afraid of failure, God's harsh judgment, or are you discontent with the gifts God has given you so you won't even do the minimal amount of work that God expects as his servant?

## Biblical Stewardship

The first two servants in this parable were commended and celebrated for taking risk to grow their silver. It had to take constant work, management and re-investment. These two servants did not get lucky, or win the lottery. Remember, the master was gone a long time. Growing assets in any environment takes careful work and intentional care, it doesn't just happen. For us to be commended and celebrated stewards of what we have been given will take intentional work and care as well as risk. My concern is not that we take too much risk, but rather that we live more like the third servant rather than the first two.

Biblical stewardship begins with our recognition that God is sovereign and therefore we should embrace our role of his managing servants, and intentionally work to grow in our biblical responsibilities. Biblical stewardship should motivate us to proclaim the gospel with our lives and our mouths. Biblical stewardship should reflect our obedient readiness as we work and wait on our Lord to return. Biblical stewardship should permeate everything we do as we take the gospel into our world with the goal of increasing disciples where the Lord grants grace. But, don't let fear of failure and uncertainty about the future paralyze you into laziness and disobedience, because following the steps of the third servant is not an option for believers. The third servant did not experience the additional work and responsibilities of the final kingdom. He was cast into darkness.

## Stewards Not Owners

You see, as a follower of Christ your only option is to live your life like the first two servants. And then you can rest assured that in grace, God will multiply the fruit that your life produces. The third servant represents those who think they are religious and pleasing God, but are not true servants of the King.

So then you have to ask yourself...where am I spending all of my time, money and resources? Are you living each day expecting and preparing for Christ's return? Are your life pursuits reflective of kingdom values? Does your management of time,

money and resources reflect the strong and steady stewardship of the kingdom resources God has given you? Or are you pursuing other loves rather than kingdom living? Are you willing to risk all to share the gospel?

**Conclusion** (Borrowed heavily from The New Bible Commentary, D.A. Carson, et al)

The Lord has gone away for a long time and has given us as his servants' responsibilities to fulfill. The real issue is who will be ready for his long awaited return, and who will he find working when he does return? Readiness is not passively waiting for the master's return, but aggressively getting on with the work of the kingdom and making the most of the opportunities God has given us.

We are each given opportunities and responsibilities according to our own individual abilities (as God sees fit). The amounts given to the servants in the story were no small amounts. Even the servant who was given the least was given a large sum of money to manage. The expected return is in proportion to what is entrusted to us. And in God's sovereignty we can be confident that in our individual giftedness, God will only hold us accountable for what is appropriate.

It is significant that the two successful servants received identical commendations, and since the scale of their original responsibility is different, the expected achievement is also different. But, to have a lesser responsibility does not excuse us from appropriate action. Hoping to avoid doing anything wrong, or opting for safety is in fact being lazy and disobedient.



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