

Entrusted
By Jason Huff
Psalm 97:9-12, 2 Timothy 1:8-14, Luke 19:11-27

This week's final Scripture reading comes from Luke 19:11-27. Listen now to the Word of God. "While they were listening to this, he went on to tell them a parable, because he was near Jerusalem and the people thought that the kingdom of God was going to appear at once. He said: "A man of noble birth went to a distant country to have himself appointed king and then to return. So he called ten of his servants and gave them ten minas. 'Put this money to work,' he said, 'until I come back.' But his subjects hated him and sent a delegation after him to say, 'We don't want this man to be our king.' He was made king, however, and returned home. Then he sent for the servants to whom he had given the money, in order to find out what they had gained with it. The first one came and said, 'Sir, your mina has earned ten more.' 'Well done, my good servant!' his master replied. 'Because you have been trustworthy in a very small matter, take charge of ten cities.' The second came and said, 'Sir, your mina has earned five more.' His master answered, 'You take charge of five cities.' Then another servant came and said, 'Sir, here is your mina; I have kept it laid away in a piece of cloth. I was afraid of you, because you are a hard man. You take out what you did not put in and reap what you did not sow.' His master replied, 'I will judge you by your own words, you wicked servant! You knew, did you, that I am a hard man, taking out what I did not put in, and reaping what I did not sow? Why then didn't you put my money on deposit, so that when I came back, I could have collected it with interest?' Then he said to those standing by, 'Take his mina away from him and give it to the one who has ten minas.' 'Sir,' they said, 'he already has ten!' He replied, 'I tell you that to everyone who has, more will be given, but as for the one who has nothing, even what he has will be taken away. But those enemies of mine who did not want me to be king over them -- bring them here and kill them in front of me.'"

If you watch TV on Sunday evenings unwinding after a long day at Church of the Covenant, odds are that you're watching **Undercover Boss**. It's the highest rated show on Sundays and in the top 15. Each week, the CEO of a major company gets down in the trenches and spends a week as an unidentified newbie with his own firm. Sometimes, the CEO finds great workers doing their best despite problems he's actually created. Other times, the CEO has to step in when someone gets really out of line. At the end of each episode, the standouts find themselves promoted and honored. No wonder it's gotten huge ratings – we like the guy at the top of the corporate ladder working the drive-thru or the forklift, and it's nice to think that the person in charge really knows what's going on. And promotions for front-line workers? There's nothing not to like!

This week, our Scripture lesson points to a similar situation. Jesus's parable talks about our place as servants of the eternal king. It's a tale that's exciting and a little bit frightening. The king will be coming to see what we've done, and it illustrates God's trust in us, the rewards that await the faithful, and the fate of those who disobey. In the story, a prince is heading off to a distant country to be crowned king, even though many in his own land hate him. He gathers ten of his servants and gives them each an amount of money worth 4 months wages. "Put it to work," he says, and he heads out. Eventually he comes back, and he finds out what his servants have been doing for him.

One servant multiplies the money ten times. The king is ecstatic in his praise and says, “You’ll be in charge of ten cities,” he says. Another multiplies the money five times, and he’s put in charge of five cities. Things are looking great. But then comes the third servant. He claims that the master is harsh and unyielding, a hard man that expects more than he should. But in spite of this, the man has done nothing with what he has! The king takes the money from him and gives it to the first servant. The wicked servant is left with nothing as the king takes control of his kingdom, rids himself of his enemies, and gives the other servants authority to rule.

It’s difficult to get to the bottom of what Jesus is saying in this parable. Let’s get a few things out of the way first. According to Luke, the main reason Jesus told the story at this particular point in time was to let the crowds know that the Kingdom of God wasn’t going to instantly appear upon His arrival in Jerusalem. He wanted His followers to know He would be gone a long time, like the prince who’s traveled faraway to be coroneted. God was planning something far different than their expectations – something far better, too.

But this isn’t the only time Jesus ever told this parable. Matthew records another time Jesus taught it with different details. So there’s more here we’re supposed to understand. We also have to ask ourselves – if the king in the parable stands for Jesus, is He a good and wise ruler or a bloodthirsty tyrant? Going a bit deeper, we can see what Jesus was teaching us.

The first thing we see is this: *God has entrusted each one of us with His Kingdom.* In his absence, the prince hands over his wealth to his servants and gives them a simple command – do business with it. He doesn’t tell them how they must do it; he’s not a micromanager. He gives them resources and says, “Go to it.” This is the kind of boss you want to have. He wants the job done and wants it done well, but isn’t going to force you into a mold you don’t fit. This boss has enough trust in you to give you the resources you need and allow you to do your thing.

As believers, we say that Jesus Christ is Lord and Savior, which in so many words is saying that He’s the boss of me. But this passage illustrates His trust in us. He’s given us what we need to complete the job we’ve been asked to do. What is that job? The New Testament teaches us to live lives of belief and faithfulness to God, lives that that bring others into His Kingdom. Our job as the church is to witness for Christ and to bring the world to Him. It’s through us that God brings people to himself.

Now the great thing is that God has given each of us unique skills and abilities. His expectation is that we use what He’s given us. I have a car that’s running great with nearly 150,000 miles on it. But if I took that car 50 feet into Lake St. Clair, I wouldn’t have a boat... I’d have a dead car! In the same way, if God gave you the mind and skill to become a surgeon to heal the sick and proclaim Him through that gift, at the end of it all, He’s not going to ask you, “Why didn’t you write a children’s Bible?” If God made you tone deaf, He’s not going to ask you, “Why didn’t you write me a song?” God is not unreasonable. He will hold us to account for what we’ve been given, not what we haven’t.

But we have to keep in mind that God has entrusted us, the church, with the gospel. We are commanded to spread the good news that Jesus Christ has come to forgive and to save everyone who would believe in Him and follow Him faithfully. Most folks in the church have forgotten or never knew it in the first place. A recent survey of 1,000 church attendees asked the question, “Why does the church exist?” According to 89% of the responders, the church’s purpose was “to take care of my family’s and my spiritual needs.” Only 11% of them said the purpose of the church was “to win the world for Jesus Christ.”¹

Here’s the truth of it...our spiritual needs cannot be met by looking inward. The way they’re met is by looking outward...first to Christ, who forgives our sin, and then to the world around us who needs His forgiveness. God has made us to use the gifts and resources He has given us, not to hoard them. Jesus told us, “Seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all the things you need will be given to you.” When we act as ambassadors for Jesus, when we follow after Him and declare His love to the world, we find that our spiritual needs are met. The servants in today’s story aren’t asking what they can get from the king because he has already paid the price for their services. Jesus has atoned for the sins of His people; He has paid the price for us, and so the church’s main purpose is to serve Him by spreading the news about Him so that all people might enter His Kingdom with joy.

And while Jesus expects us to use the gifts entrusted to us to spread the word, the second thing we see in the passage is this: *He rewards the faithful far beyond any reasonable expectation.* The first servant does really well with the king’s money; it’s multiplied ten times. He’s an awesome businessman. But as the king’s servant, anything he earned belongs to the king, so it’s stunning what he receives. First off, he’s put in charge of ten cities. The Greek terminology means the servant has been given ruling authority. He’s a ruler himself now, subject only to the king! Second, we find out that the king gives him all the money he earned while the king was away. He even receives the money given to the wicked servant! We’d think that the situation with the second servant might have been different. He started out with the same amount of money as the first servant, but he only made half the amount the first servant made. But he’s rewarded with five cities!

The king in this parable turns out to be deeply generous. The servants had no reason to expect anything from him; they were just doing their jobs. In the grand scheme of things, the amount of money they were trusted with wasn’t all that much. And yet he grants them authority and power and wealth for their loyal service, for being faithful with the job with which they were entrusted. Can there be any doubt that this would be a great person to work for?

Imagine if you worked for an auto maker for ten years and did a great job. Would you expect for them to give you ten dealerships and ten cars free of charge? If you worked as the perfect secretary for a doctor for ten years, do you think you and your whole family would get free health care for life? Our world just isn’t that generous. *We* aren’t that generous! What the king does is like giving a \$1000 tip on a \$10 meal. It’s that incredible.

¹ Greg Laurie, “How To Have A Growing Church, Part 1 (Communers or Consumers?),” *Christian Post*, <http://www.christianpost.com/article/20100309/how-to-have-a-growing-church-part-1-communers-or-consumers/index.html> (n.p., accessed 17 March 2010).

This parable shows us that God is incredibly gracious with us. He promised the Israelites He would show love to the thousandth generation of those who loved Him and kept His commands. He gave His Son to us so that we could be redeemed, and Christ died while we were still sinners! Revelation paints a portrait of eternity where there is no more mourning or sorrow or pain, where God's people rejoice in His presence, where we will serve Him and see Him face to face. And this is only a taste of what awaits those who love Him! This parable leaves no doubt that God loves us and will lavish that love on all who respond in faith. And we must remember... Jesus is not a king from afar. He set aside His kingship and became one of us so that He could relate to us, stand alongside us, and save us. He's the perfect "undercover boss."

But the third servant and the rest of the parable make the final point clear: *God will eventually judge those who refuse to use their gifts in His service and those who oppose His rule.* At first, we want to feel sorry for the third servant. He says he's afraid of his master – afraid of his harshness and how he reaps what he didn't sow. But before we take his side, we have to read between the lines. Simply put, the third servant is a liar.

Here's what gives the man away... first, the actions of the king with the first two servants prove he's the opposite of what the wicked servant says. Charles Dickens' *Christmas Carol* is a great story because we know that it's not how things normally happen. Generous people stay generous, and Scrooges stay Scrooges. We don't see this kind of change unless, like in the story of Scrooge, God gets a hold of somebody and changes their heart. The king is a lavish giver who rewards his people for their service abundantly! This isn't a radical change of heart; the king shows his everyday nature by rewarding his faithful servants. The wicked servant actually accuses his master of theft, which given the master's actions is simply slander.

In the same way, we have to be careful how we see God. If we see Him as a harsh taskmaster who expects far more than we can give and who wants to beat us down at every opportunity, we're got the wrong god! God is gracious and loving and kind to His people. We see countless evidences of this even in our own lives. Does He judge? Yes, He does. But His judgments are perfect and are carried out in His perfect understanding. Here's how 2 Peter 3:9 puts it: "The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance." More often than not, God withholds His judgment so that we might come to know Him as Savior and Lord.

But here's the second part of the servant's lie... he says he is afraid of the master. Yet he refuses to do what the master commanded! If he really feared the master, he would have done what was necessary to avoid the master's judgment. Think about it this way: how many of us fear getting speeding tickets? (I don't want a show of hands because then I'd be accused of asking people to lie in church.) Nobody wants to pay \$150, sure. But we aren't that scared of getting one. If we were, nobody would ever speed! If you knew that *every time* the speedometer in your car went over 70 miles an hour, a little bell would go off and your car would spit out a bill for \$150, you'd be afraid. But there just aren't enough police to stop us all! So most of us, some of us on occasion, some of us with frightening regularity, break the law because we aren't afraid of it. And even if we do get hit with one or two here or there, we think the amount of time we save is worth the risk. The situation with the servant is far worse, though, because he *knows* he will be held accountable and he *still* doesn't fear the master's judgment.

Three different times, the Bible tells us that “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.” It’s not the end of wisdom. Those of us who fear Him eventually learn to love Him and enjoy Him too. But if you don’t respect God, if you don’t truly think that God will ever judge you or your actions, that’s foolishness. That’s the situation the third servant faces. If he really feared the master, he would have done *something* with what he was given. The king would have accepted even the most basic use of his money; even having it collect interest would have satisfied the king. Even if the servant had invested the money and lost some of it, he still would have been obedient. The king didn’t say to make a profit with the money, merely to do business with it. But the servant disobeyed completely. By his actions and his lies, the servant shows that he is among those who judge and despise the king and openly rebel against him.

When we read the final judgment of the king against those who oppose him, that he has them killed in his presence, it seems brutal, perhaps cruel or evil. If the parable is about God, then isn’t God heartless and wicked Himself? Why doesn’t God just give everybody a free pass? It’s because of this: God is perfect. He is perfect love and perfect grace and perfect justice and perfect goodness all wrapped up into one. To oppose perfect love is to be hateful; to oppose perfect grace is to be unforgiving; to oppose perfect justice is to be unjust; to oppose perfect goodness is evil. When we oppose God, we are evil. Now we’ve heard it said that we should hate the sin but love the sinner. That’s true. Not a single living person is beyond redemption. But when the king returns to settle accounts, when all is said and done, we will be judged for who we trusted and who we’ve become. We either will have trusted Christ and been transformed by Him into the people God always intended for us to be, or we will have trusted in ourselves and opposed God and become His enemies. Ultimately, true and perfect love and mercy require that true justice be done against those who deny God. Otherwise, justice itself would be unjust.

What do we take home today from all of this? Simply this: determine to be a faithful servant. Listen to where God’s Spirit is leading you and follow His paths, checking what you hear by Scripture to make sure you aren’t led astray. God has entrusted you with a sacred task, a holy mission, to spread His news far and wide. So do it! And find joy in it, because God is gracious and loving, and His rewards are both now and eternal. Find joy in the fact that when you serve Him faithfully, you will never need worry about His judgment. Instead, be confident that God has given you unique talents and skills to use so that others may come to know Him, so that they too can avoid judgment and enter the wonder of God’s Kingdom.

Here’s the funny thing about this passage. The king gives ten servants gifts and talents, but we only hear about what happened to three of them. We are the other seven servants. God is the true “undercover boss”...nothing is hidden from His sight. On His return, will you have your investment in His Kingdom to show to Him, or will you be empty-handed?