

## **“THE FAITH TO RISK”**

Matthew 25:14-30

preached at Power Praise on November 15, 2009

Three servants were given a substantial sum of money. The amounts differed, but each was substantial. The first two invested it. We don't know how or how long they invested, but we know that in the end they doubled their money, a 100% return. Now I know something about investments and I know that in order to receive a 100% return you have to take some chances, you have to put the money at risk. That means instead of a 100% return they could have had a 100% loss. Then when their master returned and audited the books, they would have been in serious trouble. The servants knew that possibility going in and yet they went ahead and took that risk.

The third servant looked at the same odds, the same possibilities and decided that he wanted no part of the risk. He couldn't imagine the master's anger if he lost even one penny. So he did the safest thing he could. He dug a hole in the back yard and stashed the money there so when the master demanded an accounting, it could all be returned. Now we look at him burying those funds and say, "How stupid," but it really wasn't. Israel is the major crossroad between Europe, Asia, and Africa. And often bandits and armies traveled those roads, and if either group knew about those bucks, they would have been confiscated, stolen. The safest thing to do was to bury the treasure. An old rabbinic saying was that burying treasure in the ground relieves one of all responsibility because it is the safest thing to do. And so the servant removed all his risk, and in doing so he also removed any chance of making a profit.

When the master returned and checked the books, we discover that he was more interested in the risk than the security. So because of his fear and timidity, that third servant ended up getting that which he feared most, a strong reprimand and an even stronger punishment because he had been given a significant treasure and he did absolutely nothing with it. It was just hidden there, of no use to anyone or anything.

Have you ever thought about how much trust that master had in his servants? He gave them money along with the complete authority to do whatever they wanted with it. That is quite a change from most of the world. Often we don't trust one another. We don't trust attitudes or actions. In ancient Israel, when a contract was being made, various animals were killed and sliced in half. The animals were then used as the sides of a small path. The principals of the agreement would walk between those torn carcasses as part of their own assurance, that if they did not abide by the contract, if they did not do their part, that they should be treated as the animals had been, that is, torn apart. Today attorneys write our contracts, and if things don't happen as we expect, we unleash those attorneys so they can tear apart the finances, and sometimes the business of the alleged culprit. It can be just as threatening.

Sometimes we show our mistrust by giving responsibility for results, while withholding the authority to get the job done. I've seen this happen many times, even in the church; or maybe especially in the church. I remember a time in my home church when I chaired the education committee. I was told to increase the Sunday School attendance. Like many other churches, our Sunday School dropped from 800, 700, 600, to 300 or 200, and it was no longer acceptable, so I was giving the task of changing things. I took that job seriously. We looked at some options and I came back to the council to say, "Suppose we ..." "No, we can't do that." "Well maybe we could ..." "No, we can't do that." "What if we ..." "No, we can't do that." And so it went. I realized that my true mission was to change our

circumstances, without making any changes. I was given the responsibility to make things happen without the authority to do anything differently than it had always been done. We trust what was, even if it is lacking, more than we hope for what will be. And so we give responsibility without authority because we don't trust people to do what we give them the responsibility to do, or the way they will do it. Often, we don't even trust God because we pray, "Lord, thy will be done, but this is what I expect your will to be."

But the man in this parable does not display any distrust. There were no restrictions on how the funds would be used. He gave responsibility to care for those talents, and with it, the authority to get the job done. So when the outcome was evaluated, it was a fair evaluation. Each had total authority to make things happen, and the more things that happened, the better the evaluation.

Similarly, when God brought us into this world, we were given the power and authority to make things happen. We have complete freedom over what we do with our talents, our abilities, our life. God gives us the freedom to choose the way we will go, the works that we will try to accomplish. And the time will come when we stand before God to be evaluated for what we have done with what we have been given. We will be judged on the paths we walked, the associations we made, and the works we have done. Some might say, "But wait! I thought we are saved by grace, not works." That is true. Salvation is ours through the death and resurrection of Jesus. When we belief on him and in him, we receive life as a gift. But James wrote, "Faith without works is a dead faith." Our works, like the work of the servants in the parable, will be fairly evaluated, based on what we have tried to do, and what we have accomplished.

All that leads back to the servants and the risk that they were expected to take. In the classic movie "Once Upon a Time in the West." Henry Fonda played a ruthless villain. In one scene he berates a minor character, shouting, "Look at you, wearing a belt and suspenders. How can you trust a man who doesn't even trust his own pants?" A lot of times we are like that. We are so worried about the possibility that our pants might fall down, that we might be embarrassed and vulnerable, that we go to great extent to protect ourselves. Spiritually, emotionally, legally we put on belt after belt, and one pair of suspenders after another, all because we don't trust ourselves; all because we want to protect ourselves as much as possible. We want to control our environment as much as we can.

That was the situation of the third servant. I look at that servant and I know that I am supposed to condemn him as his master did, but I have trouble doing that, because I see too much of myself in him. I understand how he justified his actions. You see, with the rest of the conference I am involved in a pension plan. And I have control over my funds in that plan. Regularly they tell me how my funds are doing and ask whether I want to invest them differently. I can stay fully diversified, the safest way, or I can move it to others funds, some more risky, more aggressive in their pursuit for high returns. But for decades, I would simply keep 100% in the fully diversified fund, because I knew it is safe. I feared that the day would come when I looked for those retirement funds only to find that I had taken too much of a risk and lost them. Then I would have to tell Nancy. Talk about being thrown into outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth.... Because of my fears I limit my risk, and in limiting my risk I also limit my return.

And there are other times where I consciously limit my risk. I've gone to places where I had the opportunity to go bungee jumping. I never got in line, and I don't intend to. People can tell me that it's really safe, that I have nothing to worry about. "You just let yourself go." No, I don't think so. This is the only self I have, and I don't want to just let it go so easily. That is a risk I am not willing to take. I would rather miss the return of excitement and exhilaration than risk the security and safety of staying on the ground. If I decide to bungee jump, I'll work my way into it by tying rubber bands around my waste and jumping off the garage. If that excites me I'll move on from there.

But there is a risk in not taking risks. By continually choosing safety and security as our primary concern we risk opportunities we may never see again. Nadine Stair, an 85 year old woman, reflected on her life and offered this commentary, "If I had my life to live over ... I would take more chances, I would take more trips, I would scale more mountains, I would swim more rivers, and I would watch more sunsets. I would eat more ice cream and fewer beans. I would have more actual troubles and fewer imaginary ones. You see ... I was one of those people who lived prophylactically and sensibly and sanely, hour after hour, day after day ... I've been one of those people who never went anywhere without a thermometer, a hot water bottle, a gargle, a raincoat and a parachute ... If I had it to do all over again, I'd travel lighter, much lighter, than I have. I would start barefoot earlier in the spring, and I'd stay that way later in the fall. And I would ride more merry-go-rounds, and catch more gold rings, and greet more people, and pick more flowers, and dance more often. If I had it to do all over again. But you see, I don't."

What experiences do we abandon in the name of safety? What joys do we forfeit in the name of security? Of course if you really want to be safe, don't ride in cars; they cause 20% of all fatal accidents. Don't stay home; 17 % of all accidents occur in the home. Do not walk on the street or sidewalk; 14% of all accidents occur to pedestrians. Don't travel by air, rail, or water; 16% of all accidents happen that way. However, only 0.001% of all deaths reported, occur in worship services. Hence, the safest place to be is in church. Sunday School is also relatively safe. Which points us to the fact that if we invest ourselves in Sunday School and Church, if we invest ourselves in Christ there is very little risk, but there is a tremendous opportunity for return.

This Parable of the Talents calls on us to consider what we will put at risk by investing ourselves and what we hope to receive in return for that investment. It is easy to look at the risks we take financially and physically, maybe even emotionally, but Christ is not calling that into question. No, Jesus is asking what we will risk spiritually. What will you risk in faith, in service for Christ?

Think about this parable. Christ, our master has gone away. We don't know how long he'll be gone or when He might return. But before he left he trusted us enough to give us a tremendous gift, a most bountiful gift, justification, salvation, eternal life in Christ. The right to be found innocent of any wrongdoing, any sinfulness, as we stand before God. We have been given the security of knowing that God can bring forth life where there is no life, even through death. As the old hymn says we are safe and secure from all alarms when we lean on the everlasting arms of Jesus. A wonderful gift has been entrusted to us, a magnificent treasure has been placed in our hands. And what will we do with this faith? This treasure?

Over the years far too many Christians have operated on the fear that they might somehow lose this precious gift; that when the master returns they will not be able to give back that which they have been given. They fear that if they question what they have been taught about the scriptures the gift will disappear and so they do not read the gospels, risking nothing. They fear that if they question the traditions of the church the gift will disappear, and so they just keep going through the motions, risking nothing. They fear that if they question even their own beliefs, their faith will dissipate, and so they don't look, they don't examine, and they risk nothing. They fear that if they risk teaching they will look foolish. If they risk sharing they will be ridiculed. If they risk inviting friends or neighbors or co-workers they will be rejected, and so they risk nothing at all, burying their faith deep within their lives, perhaps taking it out to dust it off on Sunday morning, showing it only in the traditional safety inside the church building, but otherwise hiding it completely. Passing it down from generation to generation like an ancient family heirloom, passing it along complete with the warnings, "This is the faith grampa had. This was the gift of faith great-grandma was given. But don't use it, don't touch it, don't show it off, don't let anything happen to it, don't risk it in anyway, so when the master returns we can say >See, here it is, just like you gave it to us.”“ \

Funny thing about those heirlooms, though. Over time they get packed away in attics and basements, and we forget to bring them out for a Sunday or two, and then for a year, eventually forgetting our faith even on Christmas and Easter. And then when we stand before the master we can only say, "Gee, I know I had it here somewhere, 'cause I buried it long ago to make sure I wouldn't lose it." And even if we can find that faith, it will be dusty, chipped, weak and stained, maybe even warped, moldy, and rotting.

The gift of faith Christ has given to us is not intended to be buried somewhere in our life. It is given to be used. It is intended to help us through our daily life. It is to build us up and encourage us. It is to show our husband and wife and children, our friends and neighbors and co-workers, for when our faith is active, when it is used others will see it, they will ask, "What is that you have? What is it that gives you a joy for life that enables you to bear the trials and burdens of life? What do you have that gives you the hope and security of eternal life?" It is at that moment when we can invest our faith, invest it in ourselves and in those around us. And when we do that, we will see faith grow, we will see a return, an accomplishment that we will be able to lift up before Jesus, before God and say, ASee the return, see what I can give to You, what I have done in Your name all because I trusted You, and I trusted myself. I kept my faith active and alive, out here for all the world to see.”

The parable of the talents is not simply a tale that was told long ago. It is a story for you and for me, a story that is to be played out in our life, for our Master, the Lord Jesus Christ has gone away for a while, but before he left he gave something most precious, a gift of grace, of faith which is in our hands. It is ours to do with in whatever way we want. Some fear losing it and so they don't risk it in any way shape or form. But in truth, the only way we can lose our faith, our grace is if we don't take some risks with it, if we hide it, bury it somewhere in our life. Use your faith to lift up your life. Use your faith to grow in spirit. Invest your faith in yourself, in your family, in your friends and neighbors, invest your trust and faith in all the people around you, and watch the returns begin to come in. Watch as the family of God, the people of faith grow by 10%, 50%, 100% and even more not when we hide it but when we use it, when we step out to share the grace, knowing that when we go with God there is

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no risk, there is only the promise of bountiful blessings in our church and in our life. So go forth and begin to make it so. Invest your faith by trusting in yourself and in the Lord, and walking in the world with the same confident trust and faith that Christ invested in you. And in your life may it be so. Amen.