

Parables of Jesus

Message 12

What Does God Expect of Your Life?

Luke 19:11-27

How a Repentant Sinner Should Live

Did you ever get in your car and drive across town, only to realize after a while that you forgot where you were going? You would feel pretty foolish, wouldn't you? I am not sure I have ever done that, but I have often gone into the kitchen or living room for something, but forgot what it was when I arrived. We feel rather foolish when this happens because we want our lives to have some purpose or meaning behind them. You don't want to spend your day wandering aimlessly around. You want to accomplish something significant. Otherwise you become discouraged that you have wasted your time.

Oddly, though, while we don't want to drift aimlessly through the day, most of us do tend to drift aimlessly through life. Most of us are not like Dr. Bob Weber, a friend of mine from Texas. He decided as a child that he wanted to be a famous surgeon, and planned each year of his life toward accomplishing that goal. Christians are not much better than anyone else. When I was a student, a speaker once challenged us to consider what our epitaph could be. "John made a lot of money for himself and built a big house." "Sally kept herself fit until the end." "Sam always paid his bills on time." "Jill broke the glass ceiling in her firm." Even if you do have a goal in life, is it a goal worthy of a Christian? A bumper sticker once summed up the life goal of many Americans, "Life is a game, and he who finishes with the most toys wins." Even Christians can get caught up in the rat race of keeping up with the Joneses. American culture lusts for more money, more possessions, and more promotions – and we can get swept along.

But you might object – and many Christians do – that the essence of the Christian life is precisely *not* in achievement. Isn't this what the Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector (Luke 18:9-14) was about? The Pharisee was a stellar embodiment of the religious ideal. He put us to shame in his careful study of God's word and his zeal in obeying it. He certainly lived a purposeful life. But he was not the hero of the parable. It was the tax collector, the embodiment of materialism, who was approved by God. Isn't the message of that parable that God forgives the repentant sinner, but turns away from the self-righteous Christian? Without a doubt this is the message of that parable, and it is a fundamental truth of scripture that God forgives the repentant sinner but rejects the self-righteous. But that parable is not the last word on the Christian life. Having been forgiven, there is still the question of how a repentant sinner is to live the rest of his life. And that is where tonight's parable picks up.

The Nobleman and His Servants

It is a very interesting story. There is a nobleman, like a duke or a baron in European society, who has the opportunity to become a king. Clearly this is a man of capacity and distinction. A minor person would not be considered for such an honor and responsibility. Presumably he already governed vast holdings. He must have made quite an impression in ruling his territories, and perhaps also in war. But in order to receive this promotion, he must travel to a distant country. The parable doesn't tell us why he had to go to a far off country. Continuing to think in European terms, perhaps it is like Charlemagne going to Rome to be crowned by the pope.

But he could not simply pack a suitcase and start off. Who would look after his affairs until he returned? In Jesus' day there were no cars, trains, or planes, and travel was very slow and laborious. Who knows, he might be gone for several months. There were no cell phones, email, or texting to keep in touch with the situation back at home. It would be a vital necessity to have trustworthy people in charge of his affairs while he was away. All the more since, as we learn in verse 14, the citizens of the land hated him. If

he had not appointed men to look after his affairs, no doubt the people would have plundered his possessions, perhaps even beginning a revolt. So he called in his trusted lieutenants.

The nobleman delegated the security of his territories to ten servants, and to each one he gave a mina, apparently adequate wealth with which to manage the affairs of the estates. His instructions were clear and direct, "Do business till I come." Thus each servant was ordered to use his mina to buy, sell, trade, and invest so that he would reap a profit for the nobleman upon his return. And apparently his expectation was reasonable enough – for the first servant increased his wealth ten-fold. Now considering that surely the nobleman was not gone for many years – and most likely he was gone for less than a year – this was a fabulous return on investment. If you could increase your wealth ten-fold in less than a year, I would advise you to drop out of Lehigh and go to it! Without a doubt this was a very capable individual, and the nobleman recognized this as well – for he made him the governor of ten cities in the kingdom. But not all the servants were so talented. The second to appear also had fabulous success, but not quite as great as the first. He made a five-fold return on his investment. Using this as a gauge of his capabilities, the nobleman made him the governor of five cities.

Then at last came a servant with only the original mina. He had faithfully guarded the mina which was entrusted to him, and returned it safe and sound. Perhaps he thought he would receive some commendation for his faithfulness, but far from it. Judging by the way he replied to this servant, we can tell that the nobleman was greatly upset with this guy. For while it is true that he did not squander the mina, what is more to the point is that he did not obey the master. The instructions were not, "Preserve capital above all," but "Do business till I come." This man had not done any business. He had blatantly disobeyed the master. And why had he refused to do business? Because he was afraid he would fail. He knew the nobleman. He knew he was a demanding master, and he was afraid of what might happen if he engaged in a business enterprise which did not succeed. "Better to return the mina whole," he thought, "than to risk losing part of it in business."

You can understand his thinking. Perhaps this is what you would have done, too. It seems safe, and it has the appearance of faithfulness. But it is not safe and it is not faithful. It is not faithful because disobedience is never faithfulness, and it is not safe because disobedience is never safe. The nobleman harshly castigated the faithless servant. He passed judgment and found him wicked. That is a pretty severe condemnation for a guy who did not murder or steal. Clearly the master is furious with him. Obviously there will be no reward for such a lazy, cowardly wretch. And we breathe a sigh of relief that he is not flogged for his wickedness. He should be grateful that he escaped punishment for his misdeeds.

Jesus and His Servants

The first verse of our passage tells us that this is a parable about Jesus' kingdom, so there should be a place in it for those of us who are in His kingdom. By now we should have no trouble seeing that Jesus is the nobleman and we are His servants. He has given us certain resources and commanded us to use them to build His kingdom until He returns. In this regard this parable parallels the Parable of the Talents in Matthew's gospel. Those who are obedient to Jesus will be rewarded when He returns, but those who are disobedient will be condemned.

Some of you have heard this teaching before and may be thinking this is old stuff, but let's reflect on it more deeply. The point in the parable was that the servants were to use the resources they had been given to serve the nobleman. Applying this to ourselves, we have many diverse resources for serving God. Some of us have money, or will have money once we graduate and start raking it in. Others of us have talents in music, art, mathematics, science, etc. Some of us have or will develop personal connections with a wide range of people. Others have a talent for understanding, encouraging, and motivating people. Some

have public speaking abilities, and so on. None of us created these abilities any more than we created ourselves. God gave us these talents. We may have worked hard to improve and develop these abilities, but even the strength to do that comes from God. The natural human impulse is to use these resources for ourselves. This is the effect of sin working its way through our lives. We make a lot of money and buy fast cars and big houses. We use our ability to network with others to advance our popularity and career. Whatever ability we have, we instinctively use it to promote and advance ourselves. But if it is true that God gave us these resources, then we must use them for Him.

What resources do you have? What are your strengths and abilities? Are you using them for God, or for yourself? There are several ways in which you can use your resources for God. One is by engaging in a career which will use your abilities. It is pleasing to God when you use your God-given talent in math to become a good engineer. Likewise, it pleases God and builds His kingdom when you apply yourself to become a good teacher or musician or manager, etc. Of course you *can* do this selfishly. Merely becoming an engineer or musician or teacher by itself does not build God's kingdom. After all, the unbelievers do these things, too. It is when you dedicate your life and the fruit of your labors to God that your labors become a service to His kingdom.

Another very important way in which you use your resources for God is by establishing a godly family, should God bless you with a husband or wife. You and your spouse will each bring different abilities into your marriage, and together you will be able to rear godly children and maintain a household which pleases Him. Also in your community you will find ways to use your talents to serve God. Perhaps you will find a place to coach a baseball team, or volunteer to help in other ways. What about now? Are you using your abilities to serve the Lehigh community now? By using your gifts to serve others in the name of Christ, you honor God. If you have not thought of this before, the first application tonight is for you to consider how you may use your abilities to serve others here at Lehigh.

But perhaps the most significant aspect to using your resources for building God's kingdom is to apply yourself to the primary expression of that kingdom, the church. Are you involved in the church, or do you merely attend the Sunday morning service? All these other avenues of service are important and necessary, but you cannot neglect doing your part for the church. If you are gifted in singing, you must look for an opportunity to sing in church. If you have an ability to teach, you should look for an opening to teach in Sunday School. If you have technical ability, you should offer your services to the church. Whatever your resources, you must apply them to the work of the church.

One important way to do this now as Lehigh students is by taking on some responsibility in the ministry of the church here on campus. Through RUF we have hundreds of opportunities to minister to people at Lehigh, but the laborers are few. We can use you in our group. Whatever abilities you have, God has a place for you to serve right here. Some people are serving in various ways in RUF, but folks, this is just the start. Lehigh is a campus of 7,000 students, plus faculty and staff, who need Jesus. RUF and other ministries are having a good effect, but it is just a small beginning to the possibilities before us. My dream is to have a Bible study in every residential building on campus. That will take more Bible study leaders. Every year that we go on mission trip, we need someone to lead it. We also need someone to handle food, someone for transportation, etc. Here at Lehigh we need people to help out in all sorts of other ways, some very simple, but important. You should see Scott or Colin or one of the other leaders this week and ask what you can do to serve God with your resources right here in RUF.

The Angry Citizens

Using your gifts to serve God is very satisfying. But there is more in this parable that we need to examine. Unlike the Parable of the Talents, this parable introduces the citizens of the nobleman. They are

a tough bunch – very tough. As soon as the nobleman sets off to receive his kingdom, they send word ahead by a fast post that he is a wicked ruler and is unfit to serve. They seek to poison the opinion of the one granting the kingdom so that the nobleman's bid for the kingdom will be refused. In other words, they stabbed him in the back. It was a vicious thing to do. In a word, it was treason.

Now consider the case of the servants. Their task was to trade with their mina and make a profit for the master. Well, where are they going to trade? And among whom? The only people present are the citizens. Now if the citizens hated the master, how much do you think they liked the master's servants? Obviously they will hate the servants, too. Put yourself in this situation as a servant. Do you think the citizens really *want* to do business with you? What will be your chances of success? Don't you think that the citizens will do everything in their power to see you fail? Aren't they likely to make your life miserable? Isn't this a miserable assignment you have been given? Who in his right mind would deliberately try to make a profit among his enemies? Suppose you were a Jew in Israel today. Would you like to set up shop in the west bank and do business among the Palestinians? It would be suicidal! Your chance of success would be slim – if you escaped being killed. You would do anything to avoid going there. You would change jobs, or flee the country, but you definitely would not try to make a profit among the Palestinians.

But in fact, the servants made a fabulous profit. Were they afraid? I suppose so. At least the last one was. But look, they not only made a profit, but it was *huge*! How did they do it? I have no idea, and it is not critical that we know *how* they did it. The important thing is that they did it. Although it seemed crazy, maybe impossible, they obeyed the master, and they succeeded.

There is an important lesson here for us. We also live among angry citizens. When Jesus was here on earth He was killed by the people He served, and people today are no different. Jesus is the rightful ruler of all people, but many refuse to recognize His rule. In their hearts they have said, "We will not have this man to reign over us." And as they hate the master, so they hate His servants. Jesus said this explicitly in John. In chapter 15 we read, "If the world hates you, you know that it hated me before it hated you." (18) "If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you." (20) It is easy to forget this. Our roommates and classmates are nice people. Most of them treat us pretty well most of the time. But underneath, they hate our master, and they hate us as well because of him.

Now you may be a bit alarmed to hear me say this. You may think that I am advocating hostility between Christians and unbelievers. No, absolutely not! I am not advocating hostility – I am simply stating what is the normal subsurface condition. Our attitude must always be love to all people – believer and unbeliever alike. As Christ, we must love all people – even those who hate us. I say these things simply to alert us to the true state of the world. I do not want you to be deceived and ambushed someday. In this society, most of the time we are at peace with unbelievers. In other societies the normal situation is one of persecution. Christians are persecuted, killed, raped, and enslaved daily in the Sudan. Pastors in China are routinely harassed and imprisoned. This is simply the citizens of this world expressing their true colors. We are very blessed in this country to have relative peace for the time being.

The Assurance of Success

But there is wonderful news in the midst of these sobering thoughts. Just as the servants succeeded in making a profit doing business among the rebellious citizens, we also have the promise of success in our labors for Christ. Even in the Sudan, China, India, and elsewhere where Christians are routinely persecuted, the church is growing, often with great speed. And for you, here at Lehigh, you will succeed beyond your wildest dreams in serving God. But you must get out there and do it.

Are you engaged in building Christ's Kingdom? Are you using your resources to serve God? If not, why not? Are you afraid? Are you afraid that you might fail? Perhaps you will look foolish. Perhaps you

roommates will think you are a fanatic if you get too involved. Perhaps you will have less time for entertainment. These are all natural concerns. I share your fears. I am not naturally courageous. Left to myself, I would retire to a quiet country home with my books, where I could read and garden and enjoy the pleasures of nature. There are lots of aspects to ministry which intimidate me. But Christ calls me on, and He promises success. I have seen it in my own life. From the time that I was in college until now, thousands of times I have set out to do something fearing I would fail. But Christ never let me down, and He won't let you down, either.

Folks, if you are a follower of Christ you must serve Him. It is not easy. It is difficult and dangerous. But He promises success. Let me quote again from John's gospel. "Most assuredly, I say to you, he who believes in Me, the works that I do he will do also; and greater works than these he will do, because I go to My Father." (John 14:12) You see? Jesus promises that if you believe in Him, you will do greater things than He did. The world is a mean place, but Jesus will not abandon you out there. In John 15:15 Jesus said, "No longer do I call you servants, for a servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I heard from My Father I have made known to you." Jesus will be right there with you, and you will accomplish what He calls you to do. In John 16:33 Jesus promised peace, trouble, and success. "These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world."

If you are not a follower of Jesus, your doom is evident. The good news is that every traitor may turn from his rebellion, and Jesus will welcome you unconditionally. Why should you walk out of here tonight facing a certain eternity of punishment when you can join the joyful Kingdom of Jesus? Do not do it! Give up your evil ways and believe in Jesus tonight.

And for you who do believe, whatever you do, do not be like the miserable coward who hid his mina. Notice that Christ was faithful even to him. The rebellious citizens were executed, but the servant escaped. But what a way to live. With the master's voice ringing down the years, "Out of your own mouth I will judge you, you wicked servant." Do not follow this example! Trust Christ! Obey Him! Follow Him into the world to serve God.

C. David Green
Lehigh University
December 2, 2008