

SI: We're studying Jesus' kingdom parables, which he explains are the knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven for believers.

In other words, these parables are about things we should understand and expect as we live in God's invisible kingdom in this world.

Spiritual principles and dynamics that are at work in the world.

Before I read, one clarification.

A talent in Jesus' day was the largest unit of money, about 75 lbs. of silver.

So keep that in mind as we read. The servants received large sums of money.

But obviously, these talents of money stand for something.

Do they stand for individual talents, musical talent, math talent, business talent—we'll see!

INTRO: I'm sure you have noticed that at Chic-fil-a, when a customer says,

Thank you, the server doesn't respond by saying, You're welcome.

Instead he says, My pleasure.

Supposedly years ago Truett Cathy, the founder of Chic-fil-a, was staying at the Ritz Carlton and a hotel employee responded to him in that way.

It made such a favorable impression on Cathy that he began to train his employees to respond that way to customers, and it has now become a famous part of Chic-fil-a corporate culture.

If you had the choice between two fast food restaurants—

in the first one the servers had a bored, disinterested attitude, but in the other one they seemed to have a genuine interest in serving you, which one would you pick?

Even if the first restaurant was faster and cheaper, you would probably choose the second one, because we all understand that attitude matters because it expresses your regard or disregard of the person.

As a parent, when you ask your children to do chores, you expect them not just to do the job, you want them to do it with a good attitude.

We're all part of this family together.

It's no joy at all to a parent when a child does her chores with a frown on her face and with a body language that says this is a drag. I'm doing this but I hate it.

Once again, attitude matters, because it speaks of how your child feels about you.

Jesus tells three parables in this chapter one right after the other—

the parable of the virgins, the parable of the talent, parable of the sheep & goats.
The all have common themes.

They all present the return of the Lord as something sudden and unexpected.

They also all describe his coming as resulting in an unchangeable division
between two groups of people.

The saved and the lost.

Those who enter the kingdom of God and those who are cast into outer darkness.
Before Jesus comes, a person can move into the favorable category.

But once he comes, the division is fixed forever.

And then the last common theme in these three parables is that the people who
are lost when Christ returns and excluded from his blessing are surprised at their
rejection. But, Lord . . . they say.

So these parables are all about people in the church.

People who know about Jesus and who think they are fine with Jesus,
but find out in the end that they aren't.

Those are the common themes, but each parable has its own distinct emphasis.

At first reading, the main point of this parable seems to be that you should use
the talents and opportunities God has given you well.

Don't waste your talents, don't bury your talents. Use them well.

But the main point is deeper than that.

It is that on the day of judgment your true attitude toward God will be revealed.

It will be revealed whether serving God has really been your pleasure or not.
And in a profound sense it will be your attitude toward God that will
determine your final destiny.

Let's look at this parable by asking three questions about your attitude toward God.

I'll ask them as we go.

MP#1 Do you believe God is fundamentally giving or demanding?

What's your view of God? How do you see him.

I think that the most important part of this parable is the reply of the third servant, the servant who received the one talent.

The big issues of the parable hang on his response.

That's where we will focus our attention.

Before the master even asks the third servant a question he blurts out:

'Master,' he said, 'I knew that you are a hard man, harvesting where you have not sown and gathering where you have not scattered seed.'

"I know you are a hard-nosed, demanding son of a gun."

Some American businessmen might say: Yes, that's who I am, proud of it.

But you need to see that in the cultural context, this was not a compliment.

In that shame and honor culture, to be called hard and demanding was an insult, especially for wealthy people.

If you wanted to honor wealthy people, you called them generous and magnanimous. Even if they weren't, that's how you would flatter them.

So in real life, a servant would never have said this to his master.

But this is parable of Christ's second coming and the judgment.

And the point is that on that day people will be compelled to reveal what they really think of God, even if it's unspoken or sub-conscious

What this answer shows is that deep in the heart of some people—

some church people—remember, parables about people in the church—deep in heart is a belief God is fundamentally demanding, not giving.

That means that for them Christianity is a religion of doing things to appease a hard, demanding God.

When you have this view of God you start to act in a certain way.

You might not even be aware of it, might be subconscious.

God becomes to you such a demanding lawgiver, and his law is so searching, that you deal with it by coming up with your own standard of obedience.

You ignore the actual demands of God to make up demands you can keep and then you call that following God. That becomes your religion.

Look at the man in the parable. He came up with his own version of obedience.

The master says invest it. That's too demanding. So I'll bury it and give it back.

Why shouldn't the master be pleased with that?

Is there a name for this? Yes. It's usually called legalism.

It is replacing the deep, searching commands of God with things you can do because deep down you think God is too demanding.

So following God becomes a matter of what you wear or eat or drink, or how you vote, or the movies you watch, or whatever—how you educate your children, a doctrinal fine point.

When you believe God is hard and demanding, you have to replace his law with a law you can keep. You have to have something you can do to give to God. I know some of you grew up in legalistic churches, you've told me. They had all these extra-biblical rules. God is a hard God.

But he's not. He's giving. He's generous. God is love.

Think about the response of the servant: You reap where have not sown. Is that true about God? No. He never reaps where he has not sown. Into your heart and life he has scattered seeds of his goodness.

Here is the servant standing with talent in his hand—75 lbs. of silver—and he's saying, you gave me nothing to work with.

The Lord never reaps what he has not sown in your life.

He gives you what he asks from you.
He makes it possible for you to give him what he asks.

When our children were little, we would take them to Walmart at Christmas and give them some money to buy presents for family members. They loved it. Allison and I didn't do that because we thought we better have presents under the tree from our children come Christmas morning!

God doesn't need anything from us. He owns cattle on a thousand hills.

We gave them the money to buy us gifts because we loved them.
We wanted them to have the joy of giving. We wanted to develop generosity. The gifts they bought for us were goofy things, but they gave us pleasure.

Yes, in a sense the Lord is demanding.

He asks for you to make an offering to him of your life and talents.

He asks within the contest of his high and holy moral law that pierces the heart. But he's not hard. He's loving. He wants you to share his joy.

What about you? In deepest heart—believe God is demanding and hard?

His laws too strict, his requirements too difficult?
Or do you see that his is a gracious, giving God in Christ?

MP#2 Do you love God or dread Him?

vs. 25 “I was afraid.” Of course he was afraid.

His bad theology led to a bad emotional response to God.

Your theology, what believe about God will always affect relations with Him.

If God is hard and demanding, who wouldn't be afraid

Whenever a person is uncertain about the loving and giving character of God there will be, deep in their heart, a dread of God.

You may be conscious of it, able to articulate it—but usually not.

Usually this dread of God is unspoken and unconscious.

It will take self-examination to find it—exactly what Christ calls you to in parable

One of the signs that you dread God is discomfort, embarrassment, anger when asked about spiritual things.

Someone, a Christian person, maybe someone close—friend, husband, wife wants to talk to you about your walk with Jesus Christ, want to talk about struggles with sin, weaknesses, answers to prayer.

No way you are going to go there—no way.

Would rather have teeth pulled than to go there.

So there are various ways you avoid it.

Shift focus so talking about relationship with God to talking about God, or the Bible. You make it about theories or ideas.

Or you get defensive and just call it private.

If you are pushed you get even more agitated.

You have the uneasy feeling you are on very thin ice and underneath you is a very dark, deep pool that you don't want to think about.

That uneasiness, defensiveness, anger—dread of God, dread of the Judge, the thought of being brought into close contact with Him, even in conversation makes you afraid.

But doesn't the Bible say we are to fear God? Of course it does.

Bible uses the word fear in a very positive sense.

There is a godly fear. It's sometimes described as awe, honor.

It comes from looking on the majesty and holiness of God.

It comes from rightly appreciating his judgments.

There can at times even be a scariness to it. Your heart can pound in the night when you lie in bed and ponder his holiness and judgment.

There is another fear of God—better to call it dread.

Old writers sometimes called it slavish fear. It's a fear that makes you want to get away from him. Have nothing to do with him.

I had a friend growing up. I spent time in his home.

His father was harsh and unpredictable. His son was afraid of him. I was too.

I once saw him slap his son because he didn't hold a piece of lumber correctly his dad was trying to cut. My friend was about 12 at the time.

My friend's a grown man now, very successful.

While his dad was living, he almost never came back home to visit.

Some people would say, hopefully the majority.

My father disciplined me and loved me. I respected him and loved him.

Yes, there were times I was afraid. Usually when I disobeyed.

But I wanted to be around my father. Even now as an adult I love to talk to him.

Conversations are blessings.

But there are some people who would say:

I obeyed my father because I was scared not to. I was glad when he was gone.

His presence was a cloud. And now, as an adult, I can't say love being around him. I'm not at ease with him, conversations are shallow.

Two religions in the world—the religion of love and the religion of dread.

If you don't have one you have the other.

The religion of love says: I want to know God in all His majesty and holiness

I want to know His sinless Son Jesus Christ and give myself to Him.

The religion of dread says: I want to avoid God, demands on me are too much, harsh, make me uncomfortable and angry

Which is your religion? Do you love God or dread Him?

Only way you can love God is to be sure of His love.

You do so by looking at the manger and at the cross.

“For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son . . .”

“Perfect love casts out fear.”

“He has not given you a spirit of fear, but of power, love, and a sound mind.”

Look at Jesus see the love of God, pray will shed love abroad in heart

And then love him back. We love Him because He first loved us.”

When Christ return, those who are afraid will have reason to fear.

Those who love Him will be bold and confident.

MP#3 Do you serve God or play it safe?

“I was afraid so I went out and hid your talent in the ground.

See here is what belongs to you.”

Look at the downward progression:

He believed his master was a hard and demanding person,
so dreaded coming into contact with the master,
so played it safe, buried talent, didn't even put it in the bank to earn interest.

So what is playing it safe?

It's using all the good things God has given you in your life—all your opportunities,
all your privileges, all your advantages, all your successes—
using it all for your own comfort, security, and advantage.

It's not using your life for the kingdom of God.

You see, this is where the parable can be misunderstood.

We imagine someone burying a talent as a person who has a musical ability
but he skips the piano lessons his parents are paying for and doesn't practice.

But actually, burying your talent is using it to promote yourself and not God.

That's playing it safe.

That's taking no risks for the glory of God.

And the man ends up in hell because the way he has used his life for himself
is the greatest evidence that he has no regard or love for the master.

My sermon has been mostly negative up to this point, so instead of belaboring
what it means to bury your talent, let's look at the positive examples,
of those who invested their talents and doubled them for the master.

I wanted to use a sermon illustration at this point and tell you about a Christian
man I know who loved God and invested his talents well.

But I did a word search on my computer and saw that over the past 24 years I have
used him as a sermon illustration eight times, so I thought I should find another.

But then I thought, hey, this is my next to the last sermon.

What are they going to do? Fire me?

So let me tell you one last time about an amazing man.

He was a member of Marco Presbyterian Church named Al Rodenhouse.

He was a retiree from Michigan. I was in my late 20s. He was in his 80s.

He would take me out for coffee and reminisce about his life.

During the Depression his family struggled so much he had to quit school after 8th
grade to work. But the Lord blessed Al with a entrepreneurial mind.

That was his talent.

His first business was buying apples from a farmer, polishing them up, putting them in attractive baskets, and working out deals with downtown diners to sell them at the cash register to the lunch crowd.

It was decades later but he could tell me precisely what he paid for a bushel of apples and how much they sold for at the counter and his percentage of that sale. Everything Al touched turned to gold.

People who knew him well told me he was a multimillionaire. But what he delighted in talking about were the times he served God and didn't play it safe.

He told me many stories, but three stood out.

He was a young man in Grand Rapids, just married.

Jobs were hard to come by, but he found one driving a delivery truck.

He got asked at church to teach boys Sunday school.

But the Sunday school director had a mandatory Thursday evening prep meeting which conflicted with Al's job.

So Al quit his job to teach Sunday school. He knew God wanted him to teach Sunday school and trusted the Lord to provide.

Fast forward a couple decades. There was a housing boom in Grand Rapids and Al had started a home building company that was going great guns.

Every tenth house he built and sold he committed 100% of the profits to a Christian work or ministry.

He would tell me with a delighted laugh how uncanny it was that time and again those tenth houses made more money than the others.

As Al's wealth grew he was able to indulge in one of his hobbies, which was collecting Model A Fords. He had a whole warehouse full of them.

He was approached by someone who wanted to start a Christian radio ministry and they needed a sizable donation. Al said: Take my car collection.

The auction raised all the money needed to start the radio ministry.

Look, Lord, I've invested your talents and gained five more.

That was Al's life. He was a uniquely gifted person, but the pattern of his life was not unique. It's what the Lord Jesus wants from all his people.

He wants you to live a risky life, investing your time, employment, money, treasured possessions with pleasure, with joy, to serve him.

It is risky. It's sacrificial. Any time you do this, you are giving up things that you are inclined to hold tight and keep for yourself.

You may not see the sort of tangible successes you want to see.

But it doesn't matter, because Christ is keeping books and there will be a day of accounting.

And on that day, how gratifying it will be to hear him say to you:

Well done, good and faithful servant!

You have been faithful with a few things;

I will put you in charge of many things.

Come and share your master's happiness!