

While you wait

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- [0 : 01] Our reading today is from Luke's Gospel, chapter 19, verses 11 to 27. 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. But 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 servants to whom he had given the money, in order to find out what they had gained with it.
- [1 : 29] The first one came and said, Sir, you, 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.
- And he said, sir, you, 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.
- [2 : 39] And you take it 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.
- [3 : 55] But as for the one who has nothing, even what they have will be taken away. But these enemies of mine did not want me to be king over them.
- Bring them here and kill them in front of me. Amen. Do you take your seats?
- And if you've lost your place, we're in Luke chapter 19, picking up at verse 11, the parable of the ten miners. That's miners as in coins, by the way, not miners, you know, with their pickaxes digging out the gold.
- August 1914. Kaiser Wilhelm II confidently informed his soldiers, you will be home before the leaves fall from the trees.

March 24th, 2020. Boris Johnson informed us of a three-week lockdown. Sometimes people expect things to happen much more quickly than turns out to be the case, don't they?

[5 : 11] The Kaiser may or may not have actually believed that that would be the timescale, I suppose. But it certainly seems that most people on both sides of the wall believed that kind of rhetoric, that it would be a quick thing.

And we have a similar situation to that here in Luke 19, 11. Everybody thinks things are happening quickly. Everybody thinks we're almost there. The kingdom will appear at once, people think, verse 11.

Now, this is quite understandable. After all, Jesus has been saying that the kingdom of God has arrived. He was saying that back at the start of this journey, way back in Luke chapter 9.

That's what he sent the 72 disciples out to proclaim in chapter 10. And now he's near Jerusalem. He's coming towards the city of David. He's coming into the capital.

It is reasonable to suppose that that is where the kingdom will reach its fullness. This will be the definitive appearing of the kingdom of God.

[6 : 14] It is reasonable that people think that. But Jesus says, not so fast. Because Jesus actually has been doing the exact opposite of what Kaiser Wilhelm was doing.

The First World War general saying it'll be over soon. Jesus says it will not be over soon. They will not be home for Christmas. Verse 11 tells us this parable is told specifically to people who thought the kingdom would appear there and then.

And what this parable presents is a lengthy interim period. And that is where we are right now. We are in this interim period.

The kingdom has been announced. But it has not yet been fully realized. The king has been appointed. He has not yet returned in kingly power.

Jesus knew people's misunderstandings. And so he told them this parable to correct this mistaken understanding. And to teach them how to live in the meantime in this interim period.

[7 : 19] It's interesting to think, isn't it? Just how much of Jesus' ministry, how much of the New Testament as a whole, how much of it is concerned with correcting misunderstandings?

Time and time again, the disciples misunderstand Jesus and his mission, don't they? I mean, we saw it last week. Simon the Pharisee misunderstanding Jesus' mission to save sinners.

In past weeks, we've seen misunderstandings about the availability of the kingdom to children, to blind men, to tax collectors. Jesus correcting the misunderstandings of his followers.

And the same holds true through the early years of the church. In Galatia, people believed that Jesus hadn't done quite enough. That you needed to kind of add some religious deeds of your own on top or alongside what Jesus had done.

And so Paul writes the letter we call Galatians to correct that misunderstanding. The Thessalonians, they're confused about the second coming of Jesus. And so two more letters are written.

[8 : 23] Other people managed to suppose that somehow the mere profession of faith is sufficient, even when that profession is given the lie by one's deeds.

And so James takes up his pen to correct that misunderstanding. And so on, and so on, and so on. It's quite remarkable how much misunderstanding there is.

Fortunate for us, I suppose, in that these misunderstandings keep coming back and keep needing to be corrected. And it is good that we have God's word to correct those misunderstandings.

This happened in the days of Jesus' life on earth. It happened in the days of the early church. I think we could point to the radical recovery of the gospel in the days of the Reformation as a correction of misunderstanding.

And indeed, the same goes on. And therefore, it shouldn't be a surprise to us when this kind of correction is needed in our own lives.

[9 : 20] We shouldn't be shocked to realize that we need to be corrected in our understanding. That sometimes there are assumptions that we've made that we think that's what the Bible says.

That aren't actually what's there at all. In fact, I hope, I hope that those of you who've been around for some time, I hope you can look back on ways that your understanding has been corrected by God over the years.

It would certainly be unusual if there were nothing at all that you have ever needed to be corrected on. So I hope we're open to that correction. I hope we believe God can and does correct our understanding when we see his word through fresh eyes as we read it day by day.

I hope we believe that he does that through the words of our brothers and sisters too. Not least of our connect groups as we study God's word together. And I hope you believe that he might do that right here and right now this very morning.

Because maybe, maybe you have, maybe without much deliberate thought, maybe you've formed the impression that the key thing, even the only thing, is that you have this title of servant of the master.

[10 : 35] Christian. Now that's the key thing. That's all that matters. And it doesn't really matter what you do after that. Just that one definitive thing. Or maybe you've ended up thinking that everyone will be fine in the end.

Even those who deliberately reject Jesus as king. Well, Jesus loves people so much that no matter what people think of him, everyone will be fine in the end.

Well, to those understandings, and to a few more mistaken ideas along the way, this parable offers something of a corrective, doesn't it? That would be a good thing to be praying, wouldn't it?

To pray when we sit down with our Bibles each day. To pray when we prepare to come to church together on Sunday. To pray that God will correct our misunderstandings.

And as that happens in the course of these verses, we have presented to us here a comfort and a two-fold warning. So there's this nobleman in the parable.

[11 : 44] He's due to return after an unspecified but significant period of time. And he expects certain behavior of his servants, certain behavior of his citizens in his absence.

So too, our Savior has gone to a far-off country. He will be some time in returning. He has been some time in returning. We know not the precise length.

And just as the nobleman has expectations, so too Jesus has expectations of the whole of humanity in these days of his absence.

So, comfort and a two-fold warning. First up, the comfort, the reassurance. This man, he's heading off to be confirmed as king. He gives ten of his servants some money and instructions to make the most of that money.

The amount here, this is relatively small. In the parable that Matthew recounts, that's quite similar in many ways. There, there's five talents given to one of the servants. That's a huge sum.

[12 : 47] But here, the amount entrusted to each is sort of a few months' wages. You know, big enough to be significant but not astronomical in the scheme of things. And it makes sense that these are relatively small amounts because, as we find out in verse 17, this money is something of a test.

The servants are invited to kind of carry out this trial run to see what they can do, to see how faithful they may or may not be. And the first two servants, verses 16 to 19, tell us the first two are able to deliver quite an impressive return on this investment.

Any entrepreneur would be pleased with a thousand percent return, wouldn't they? Ten times as much back as the original stake. There seems to be a widespread agreement.

Yes, it's more plausible to have that kind of a return in ancient commerce than perhaps it is today. But that this is nevertheless genuinely impressive even in their day.

The lesser amount of five times return from the second servant, still a very, very respectable showing. And the diligence, the faithfulness of these servants is rewarded, isn't it?

[13 : 58] Such is the trustworthiness that these two have demonstrated, that they're then entrusted with significant responsibility in the kingdom of their master.

No longer trusted with just a few coins, but now whole cities they take charge. So this reward that they're given, a few different things for us to notice about this reward.

First, it's a huge reward, isn't it? Romans 8, 18, Paul says, I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.

It's a weighty verse, isn't it? Because it doesn't deny that our present sufferings might well be serious, indeed could be acute at times. But it does say that even our most difficult circumstances now are by comparison insignificant compared to the vastness, the immensity of the joy that is to come.

Who worries about the penny that falls from their pocket as they walk to the shop to collect the winning lottery tickets? That's the kind of scale of difference between even our present sufferings and the wonder of what Christ has in store for you.

[15 : 22] We sang it in the first psalm this morning, didn't we? A promise of joy to come, a huge reward in these verses. The reward is huge, and secondly, it's disproportionate, isn't it?

Somehow these tiny sums of money, they're scaled up to authority over whole cities. You can't argue, can you, that this is a commensurate reward, that it's proportionate.

This isn't a reasonable salary for the labor that has been done. This is way off the scale, isn't it? So don't be misled into thinking that somehow this is what these servants deserve.

Don't drift into thinking that God owes you this kind of reward for your service of him. This is completely disproportionate. Nevertheless, third, this future responsibility, this reward, it is clearly and directly linked to faithfulness in the past.

It's not capricious. The word because is there for a reason in verse 17. Because you have been trustworthy in a very small matter, take charge of 10 cities.

[16 : 36] It's not a proportionate response, but it's not arbitrary either. There's a distinction between these first two servants as well, isn't there?

The one made 10 minors and receives 10 cities. The one who made five receives five. There is a link between actions and reward, even if it's disproportionate.

So then what is this link? If it's not, you know, just wages, why are the two linked together? I think the link is the delight of the master.

Do you see he says, well done, my good servant. That is quite a mild rendering of the joy that is intended here.

I mean, wouldn't you be thrilled with a thousand percent return? The master is pleased. And we are supposed to take it here that Jesus is delighted by faithfulness.

[17 : 37] Not just a kind of nod and move on. Not just, okay, thanks and okay, done. No, he's delighted. There's a reward.

He rejoices when we act as he intends. He is thrilled by fidelity. He is delighted by faithfulness. He rewards those who choose to embrace his commands.

There's this abundant generosity that comes from a deep joy, exuberance in God's actions. Sometimes we kind of mask that, don't we?

We sort of read God's word, whether it's in our heads or aloud. We read it in a sort of dull monotone. You know, like you're reading a specification for what product you're going to buy or instructions for how to put something together or sort of, okay, just here is the information.

That's not how you read the Bible, is it? We should hear the joy in the master's words. That should be reflected in the voice that we hear in our heads as we read this.

[18 : 49] We should hear the joy in verse 17 and we should hear, too, the solemnity, even the anger of verse 22 when we come to that. It doesn't do us any good to flatten things out into a kind of gray mush.

Here, Jesus is delighted. These are the heights. He's delighted in this parable and he will be delighted with you when he comes into his kingdom if you are faithful in the meantime.

So, huge, disproportionate, linked to faithfulness. But fourth, notice the context of this reward or rather the context of their service, I guess.

Because these servants, they're given this instruction to go and carry out business with this stake of money. To go and carry out their master's business where? Well, in a country where a significant proportion of the people have sent a delegation to say we hate this man.

We don't want him to be king. And in that context, where the people around them hate their master, these servants are expected to go and turn a prophet.

[20 : 03] And they do. In that context, his servants are expected to obey his will and produce a prophet. We could explore that for a while, couldn't we?

Plenty of familiar ideas there for our own day. That's not for right now. Fifth, notice the nature of the reward.

Because I don't know about you, but when I think of a reward, I imagine a sunny beach. I imagine quiet.

I imagine peace. I imagine nothing that I have to do. That's what I imagine as a reward. All vast sums of money.

But, that's not what we get here, is it? I mean, it's true. Psalm 127, God gives his beloved sleep. But what God invites us to is actually not slothfulness.

[21 : 07] It's not doing nothing. Sometimes we think of the weekend as the reward for making it through the week, don't we? Or the holiday, the reward for surviving a few months of work.

But here, the reward for faithfulness is not idleness. The reward for faithfulness is an opportunity for wider service. It's an opportunity to do more in the master's service, isn't it?

He's called to go and be in charge of ten cities. That's not something you can do just, you know, lying in a hammock on a beach. This is responsibility.

Now, why does it matter that the reward for faithfulness is responsibility? Well, because if we view work as exclusively something to escape from, if our hope for the future is idleness, then it gives us a pretty negative view of work right now, doesn't it?

But work is part of God's good design for humanity. Yes, the circumstances of our work are affected by the fall.

[22 : 13] You know, the thorns and the thistles. And they will one day pass away. But the work came before the fall. And the work continues.

The reward for faithfulness is more opportunity for service. There's a great task that lies before us, isn't there? A great task that lies unfinished.

A task that really should drive us to our knees and really should rebuke our slothful ease. And we'll hear that sung about in a little while. But that's the task that we're called to, isn't it?

To faithful service now, knowing that it is part of God's design for us. So, comfort and reassurance in this passage.

Great reward for faithfulness. But, but, but, there are some really clear warnings too on there. And we can't afford to neglect that. What of the third servant?

[23 : 20] I mean, what a contrast to the behavior of the first two. No return on investment. That's pretty serious. But worse than that, not even an attempt at a return. Not even a minimum level of obedience.

What were the servants told back in verse 13? Put this money to work until I come back. The instructions weren't unclear, were they? The servant knew what he was supposed to do.

But what did he do? Servant number three took the money, tucked it away, folded into a cloth, in his back pocket, safely under his mattress. No attempt whatsoever to do anything with what was entrusted to him.

And for that decision to make no attempt, he is punished. See, see, banking the coin with the money lenders for a kind of small agreed interest, that wouldn't have been the master's first choice, would it?

You don't get your thousand percent return that way. But had servant number three done so, it is clear that would have been acceptable, at least showing some modicum of initiative, at least a small profit, at least a willingness to act, even if not the vast returns delivered by servants one and two.

[24 : 35] But that is not what this servant does. He chooses to disregard his instructions. He fails to think things through for himself and he wastes the opportunity that he has been given.

And so, verse 24, when this one miner is taken away from him, folks, this isn't a warning that the poor will get poorer and the rich will get richer.

This isn't about rich and poor. This is a warning not to the poor but a warning to those who fail to put to use that which is entrusted to them. This is a warning that they will face the consequences of that choice, that even the little they have, even the opportunity for service will be taken away.

folks, there is here a very clear warning not to be idle in God's service but rather to be diligent in putting to use what he has given you.

Whatever that might be, whether it is the musical ear of Johann Sebastian Bach, whether it is a flair for computers, whether it is the ability to take some money and make a thousand percent return, whatever gifts he has given you, he expects you to use them in his service.

[25 : 57] Maybe you have a talent for great oratory or maybe your skills feel to you pretty small and inconsequential. Well, the call is the same.

The call is to be faithful with what you have. If you fail to put it to use, if you squander your gifts, whatever they might be, then you risk the same condemnation that this servant number three receives.

I tell you that to everyone who has, more will be given. But as for the one who has nothing, even what they have will be taken away. This is a very serious warning, isn't it?

And then alongside this warning about the third servant, we then have the fate of those who verse 27 describes as enemies of the master, those who didn't want him to be king.

Do you remember these guys? They appeared back in verse 14, sending that delegation after him to prevent him from becoming king. And then they kind of disappear into the background, don't they? We don't hear anything of them for the bulk of the parable, but they reappear right here at the end.

[27 : 09] There's historical parallels to this. A guy called Herod Archelaus, who after the death of his father Herod the Great, Herod Archelaus has to go to Rome to be confirmed king.

And a delegation of Jews goes to protest the appointment of Herod as king because he has already been brutal against them under the authority of his father.

And this delegation is partially successful. He's not appointed king, but he was made Ephnarch instead. And that gives him more than enough authority on his return to Judea that guess what he did first?

Guess what happened to that delegation that went? Now we could talk about how much sense this behavior does or doesn't make in the world of the parable or in an ancient historical context.

And we could try and explain some of it away like that, perhaps. The harshness, the brutality. Well, actually, the context and the parable, it doesn't really change it, does it?

[28 : 12] Those enemies of mine who did not want me to be king over them, bring them here and kill them in front of me. Maybe some other detail belongs to the parable.

But we can't escape from the reality of judgment, can we? And to dismiss this as something fictional or something from the pages of history is to miss the warning that Jesus intends in these verses.

Because this is the same as what Paul writes about in 2 Thessalonians 1. He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus.

They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might on the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marveled at among all those who have believed.

See, in this parable, Jesus depicts what in 2 Thessalonians Paul declares.

[29 : 14] It's the same message, isn't it? Jesus is very clear. Those who reject the king, those who refuse to accept him as ruler over them, only eternal ruin awaits such people.

There isn't a comfortable way of saying this, is there? There's no sugar-coated version. You can't escape from the fact that Jesus warns us about the reality of hell.

And you know, it gets even worse because I don't think this is only a warning for those who are in open opposition like those who sent the delegation.

And I don't think this is only the situation for those who openly reject the king. We can't be 100% sure of the final fate of servant number three. Maybe he's disgraced but not ultimately lost.

Maybe that's true within the parable. But that category of disgraced but somehow okay doesn't really exist ultimately, does it? There are friends of God and there are those who reject him.

[30 : 26] Two categories. And verse 21 shows servant three has a pretty hostile view of the king. Verse 22, his master describes him as a wicked servant.

Now if that's the case, then as well as those who openly reject the king, we also have to grapple with the reality of false friends, don't we?

Those who seem to be servants but then don't actually serve. Just like servant number three who was given the money and he did not serve.

1930s onwards, the Cambridge Five, they rose high in the halls of power of the British establishment, including in MI6. They looked like they were doing what their country asked of them.

But the whole time they were passing information to the Soviets. They were convinced of the virtues of the Marxist, Leninist way of life. They looked like they served queen and country all the while passing secrets to others.

[31 : 37] False friends. It looked like patriots. They were anything but. This parable carries a really serious warning for those who stand in open opposition and a serious warning for those whose rebellion against the king is more subtle.

And that's where Jesus leaves it. It's not a comfortable place to end a sermon, is it?

It's not sending us out into the sunshine shouting with joy. A huge part of me wants to rush on to other things. But Jesus finished this parable by saying, those enemies of mine who did not want me to be king over them, bring them here and kill them in front of me.

Lord Jesus, help us to take your word seriously. Help us to hear the warnings that you give us. help us to recognize their implications for us.

Whether we stand today in open rebellion, whether honest reflection shows us that though we claim the title of servant, of Christian, that we do not serve you faithfully, that we do not live out that confession.

[33 : 22] Help us to heed these warnings and help us to see the contrast, to see the alternative on offer, not just scraping through out of the fires of hell, but the joy that is available, the rejoicing that lies ahead as you say, well done, good servant.

Impress these things upon our hearts, we ask, in order that we might live according to what you have said. Amen.

Amen.

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