

The parable of the serving master

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[0 : 00] Our reading this morning is taken from Luke chapter 12, and we're going to read from verses 35 to 40. Be dressed, ready for service, and keep your lamps burning, like servants waiting for their master to return from a wedding banquet, so that when he comes and knocks, they can immediately open the door for him. It will be good for those servants whose master finds them watching when he comes. Truly, I tell you, he will dress himself to serve, will make them recline at the table, and will come and wait on them. It will be good for those servants whose master finds them ready, even if he comes in the middle of the night or towards daybreak. But understand this, if the owner of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have let his house be broken into. You also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him. Amen. And we give God thanks for his word.

Amen. And amen. Grace does take our sin. It does. The gospel Jesus now calls us friend completely.

And we are now seated with the King forever. And that's the promise, to be seated with him at the wedding banquet. Be seated with him in the new heaven and the new earth. In many ways, that's the sermon. So let's pray. I give you a benediction. Let's go home. Love it. If you have your Bible, either in leather like I do, vinyl, or on a smart device, I want to encourage you to turn once again to our text. It's Luke 12, verse 35 through 40. And I'm restricting it to those five verses, though in your Bible it may appear to only be by half. You probably have a heading. I've got the ESV, and it says, you must be ready. And he goes on to talk about how the servants who are waiting for the master must ever be watchful and ready like a thief coming in the night, almost like a sneak attack or sneaking into the home. They've got to be watchful for their master to come sometime in the night. Might be the first watch, second watch, or third watch. And the focus is on the servants. But that's if you go on and take from verse 41 on. I see verse 41 on here in Luke 12 as an answer to Peter's question about this parable. He's asking a question. He says, this parable, is it about us servants, us 12? Or is it about them servants, the disciples? And so I want us to look simply at this parable. And you might have missed some things in this parable. You might have missed this parable because you took it in conjunction with verse 45 on. I just want to look at these five verses in this one parable. This last week, you were introduced to Zara Rutherford. She landed on Thursday and she set a world record in her landing. 19 years old, so that makes her the youngest pilot, to go around the world. She went around the globe and then she's female. And when she landed, you can see her. She landed in a, what's called a microplane. And she was celebrated and she was honored. She was glorified by all the press. But the eyes of Sarah were looking for her family. Now it was quite a trip.

We're told that she faced a number of obstacles. It was not easy. And it called for all endurance. She was, she flew in harsh weather the entire time for 155 days. She was stuck for a month in Nome, Alaska. She was isolated for more than 40 days in Russia. Weather delays made her late for her stop in Russia. So she had to renew her visa and relay her passport via the air to the Russian consulate.

[5 : 06] Wendy and I have been here two and a half years now. And Wendy is my visa maestro. And so I can imagine what it would be like to renew our visa from the air while you're flying a microplane in bad weather. While waiting, Rutherford in Russia, she worked on her university applications. Busy girl.

She faced extreme cold in Siberia. And because of that, it required that her plane be repaired. Inclement weather forced her to land in Indonesia, where she slept in the airport terminal for two days because she didn't have the appropriate paperwork to leave the airport. Thick wildfire smoke over California, U.S., made navigation difficult. And then she spent Christmas with a flat tire in

Singapore and faced an earthquake in Mexico. All told, she made 60 stops across five continents. Sarah, to me, I'm filled with questions as I look at Sarah. And I say, you know what? What kept you going?

Was it the achievement? Was it that you could say to the authorities or to the media or even to your family, look what I did? Look what I achieved? Look what I produced? Or what allowed you to endure? Maybe the only light at night was the the dashboard on your plane and that in bad weather. You're soon to make another landing. You could just stop. What allowed you to isolate yourself or repair a tire?

Or take off and go yet again through bad weather to another continent? What kept you going? What encouraged you and strengthened you to be faithful? How were you able to do this faithfully, enduringly, without quitting? Without quitting? Well, I'm glad that some in the press asked the question.

[7 : 35] And Sarah's answer was very simple. My family. My home. She said, I didn't see going through bad weather.

I didn't see that as going away from home because I'm going around the world. I'm going home. But I've got all sorts of weather patterns. And who knows in this adventure what trials I'm going to face. But I'm going home. And when I get home, my family will serve me. They'll have my favorite food. They'll let me be undisturbed and to catch up on my rest. They will encourage me. They'll love me. That's what's ahead. If you look at this parable, I want you to see that the heart, the big idea, the meaning of this parable is that Jesus personally serves his personal servants.

He rewards his servants, not because of what they've done or produced, but simply because they were faithful.

[9 : 04] They stayed awake. They endured. But if you only see that, you're missing. You're going to miss the gospel in this parable. You're going to miss the really good news that Jesus is going to unpack, but it takes the whole parable to do that. You're going to miss seeing that Jesus himself in verse 37, right in the middle of this story, Jesus in verse 37 shows us a poor trail that's unlike anything else in life. He shows us a master who stoops to serve his servants who serve him. And that's the gospel. We'll come back to this, but in order for you to, I want to do two things in the time that remains.

So first of all, I want to talk to you about how to unlock a parable. And then secondly, I want to talk to you just a little bit about how to take this personally, how to take every parable personally by locking yourself into it. Or another way to put it is how to unlock this parable. So how do you unlock a parable and then how do you unlock this parable? Now, the reason that I want to talk about how to interpret or how to read a parable in general to start off is because I don't think we do it right.

I don't think that I, for many, many years, did it right. I was never taught really how to read a parable. The approach that we have of a parable is like it's a short little story or maybe like Aesop's fable. It's a story, but it's got one moral or one principle point for my Christian walk, for my Christian faith, for my Christian life, for application, for particularly behavior.

In other words, I look at the good and Samaritan and I read that parable and I think, okay, what is the one big idea that I'm to take away? We read it and we approach it like a philosopher has issued or written this parable and the parable structure is a launch pad or a launching system for one rocket of an idea. And once we get that idea or that principle thought, we discard all the launch system.

In other words, we get the big idea out of the parable, but to the discarding or exclusion of what we prioritize as lesser ideas, smaller truths at best, things that, like we would miss in this parable, like the, you know, dressing for action and lamps burning and knocking doors and tables and thieves and all of those are more like a house if we approach a story as a story written not by a philosopher or a theologian who has only one big idea in the parables and illustration of it. But if we think of Jesus as a storyteller, he's speaking to simple minds, simple folk, theologically and biblically illiterate like many in our culture around us with a simple story. But it is, if we dare plumb the depths, quite complex, quite full. It doesn't hold just one meaning. It's full of meaning. It's like a house that you approach the house with an intent to go inside and then look out of its windows from every room. Explore every nook and cranny. Live in it.

[13 : 49] Not simply say, wow, there's the big explosive idea. I got it. The log in the eye, the splinter in my mate's eye, I get it. I should, I should take care of my own stuff before I start trying to take care of their stuff. I get it. But there's far more to it than that. And that's been, for quite some time,

that's been our approach to the parables, is we only look for the one big idea. Let me give you a bit of an exam.

This is Rembrandt's portrayal of the return of the prodigal son. What's the big idea? For those of you that are familiar with the parables, you're familiar with your Bible, and this should be most of us here with this story, you should know the story of the return of the prodigal son or the story, the parable of the prodigal son. What's the big idea of the parable of the prodigal son? It's his return, right? The big idea is the prodigal son comes to his senses. He goes back to his father who forgives him when he repents. And that's the big idea. Rembrandt, like a good artist, tells a story. And it's more than that. What, if you look, who's this guy right here? Notice he's frowning. He's looking down. That's the elder brother. And he's very nicely dressed. But he's sitting in judgment. He's saying, my brother is unworthy to be loved. And yet, we know that he's distant in a different way.

He's distant from the father by keeping the obedience, but not loving his father. Notice this right here, the sandals. This may be a little fuzzy for you, but this is a sandal. This is a barefoot.

[16:09] Also, the shaved head and the garments. The word for servant in this parable, you might have a footnote and it'll say bond servant. That's Paul's favorite word, by the way, for a disciple. It means slave.

It means in the order of things, the master is at the top of the chain of command. And the very, really lowest is the slave who would do the dirty jobs, the wash up, even the washing of feet, you know, the carrying out the food rubbish and scraping it out with his hands. Or go out and we need you to plow a field. The dirty manual labor jobs. Or we need you to do that.

But he's returning no longer as a son, but as a slave. The father, interestingly, if you look, this hand is different size than that hand.

One's a father's hand. One's a mother's hand. Interesting. When you read the parable of the prodigal son, our attention, if you only try to capture one point, your attention is drawn to the prodigal. But as Tim Keller preached and then wrote a book, what about God? Let your eye and your heart capture a prodigal God.

A God who will leave home to go after his son. He will run to embrace him against all protocol and tradition of fathers whose son has basically said, I wish you were dead.

[17:57] You'll miss the gospel. And in some ways, if you don't capture everything that's going on in a parable. Prodigal son being a great example. The father, he has a strong hand as a father, but he has a tender, compassionate heart like a mother. There are other things in this, but I'll leave it.

But the point being is that when you come to parables, there is a certain, there's certain things, there's certain, I'll give them as helpful hardware hints to unlock them, just to tick them off. Don't stop at your reading of a parable at one point per parable.

You can see, as I talked about the prodigal son just now, what I'm talking about. You could miss things. This parable that's before us, you could miss your eyes, the eyes of your heart being drawn to the master because you're focused on sleeping servants or servants that are awake, or you're focused on, wow, we've got to be in a state of readiness.

All of those things are true, but you could miss seeing the master if you only say there's one point per parable.

Connect it to the culture then and now. The Good Samaritan is a good example. We have our own Jericho Road.

[19:47] What does it look like? It may not be dusty. It may not be fraught with highwaymen that would abuse you so that we can't stop. Who's the Samaritan today?

You know, I don't, do we even know any Samaritans? Perhaps if you know Palestinians, you know Samaritans, but do you know anyone of a different race, of a different ethnic mix?

Do you have any contact with them through your regular weekly traffic, the classroom, the workplace, the neighborhood? Do we have any contact? Do we see? Do we have eyes, opportunities to serve them?

So connect it, not simply dismiss a parable historically in its own context as having no application. They all do. Jesus was a master storyteller and he was timeless. Expect your faith and your identity to be stretched.

[20:54] I'm going to come back to this when I conclude with a personal story. But to say that it's not just to be read like poetry or a sweet little scene or sweet little tight short story.

My faith is at stake. My faith can grow here. I need this. I need this truth. Don't dismiss it as just a little fable that's unrealistic for life.

We need it. I need it for my faith. Read for the simple meaning which grows with you. You can read it quite simply.

You can get the big idea perhaps quite easily. But then come back to it in that second reading or that meditation on a parable. And I'm going to invite you when I conclude to consider a parable of your choice or even the parable that we're getting ready to turn our attention to.

To take a deeper dive into it. And to hungrily look at it and say, Lord, what do you have in this that will strengthen me where I am right now? To keep my faith in you.

[22 : 08] To keep following you. To keep living for you. And to keep seeing how you see me. That I might endure. Read for a simple meaning.

But expect it to grow. It will expand even as your life expands. It will meet your circumstances as your circumstances change.

I think about the parable of the lost coin. Very simple parable. Woman lose a coin. She lights a lamp.

She searches all over a dark place. She takes out the broom. Sweeps under the couch. Trying to find things. You know, they were losing coins and couches way back then.

She sweeps the house. She finally finds it. She's elated. And she calls all of her neighbors. And I don't know if it was because of the hide and seek of the coin that she was so elated that she finally found it.

[23 : 10] Or it was a valuable thing that it restored her. But she calls all of her neighbors. They all rejoice. And Jesus, in telling this parable, says, That's what it's like in heaven when a sinner repents.

That parable for me, I held the very simple meaning that lost people matter to God.

Our repentance matters to God. And it matters that all in heaven there's a choir that sings hallelujah whenever others or I repent.

But, you know, I've come to see particularly as I go older, I have more and more a heart for family members to come to faith, for neighbors to come to faith in Jesus Christ.

I look at that parable and I take heart to say, I'm going to light my lamp. I'm going to take my broom out, whatever that looks like. I'm going to search all the house.

[24 : 12] I'm going to get my neighbors even praying about this lost person or family member or neighbor or workmate or classmate and everything with a hope and an expectation that they're going to come to faith in Christ because I know that they matter to God.

You with me? Okay. Let's leave this. Point number two. How do we lock into this parable or how do we unlock this particular parable?

Well, we start with, if you've still got your Bibles open, verse 35. Stay dressed for action. Again, you've got a footnote there. And it says, it's also let your loins stay girded.

Now, I have, we live in a flat with five neighbors in our building. I've never said anything about my loins or their loins.

That's not in my language. But this is what it looks like. This man needs to be ready to work.

[25 : 21] And he can't work in that climate with this long flowing robe. He can't, he can't work. It's going to, it's going to trip him up.

So he's not, as it says in verse 37 about the master, he dressed himself for service. The man initially is not dressed for service. So he pulls up his garment, exposing his legs, thus identifying himself as someone who is going to be working.

It's kind of like a worker, you know, in the field taking off the jacket or taking off a shirt or something like that. It's just like, you know, it's a laborer.

And then it shows him starting to bundle that garment. And what I don't have is he would have a belt. And he would either tuck it into his belt or he would take his belt off and he would wrap it around him.

And anyone that sees this man would say he is in the ready, ready position to work. He is prepared to do labor in the field or to serve a meal.

[26 : 36] He's prepared to butcher the animal or he's prepared to bring it to those who are reclining at the table or do all of those things.

He's prepared. We believe that it's actually this indication or communication visually that someone with their loins girded, their garment tucked in, belted, ready for service, is it was this text that the Catholic Church and some Anglican priest in their orders still today wear a long robe with a big belt. And it communicates we are servants of the Lord and we're always in the ready, even though they're not tucked up. We're always ready to serve.

We're always watchful as to how we can serve the Lord. That's for the servants though. And if you stop there as the meaning of the parable, you're going to miss the gospel.

You're going to start focusing if you just say, oh wow, in this parable, verse 35, stay dressed for action. Loin up, you know, gird up your loins for action.

[27 : 53] Keep your lamps burning, folks. Don't let those lamps go out. You know, he could come like a thief in the night. You've got to be in the ready, ready position. Stay awake.

It could lend itself to performance. Not faithful for faithfulness sake to the master, but faithful for the reward or the gift of achieving faithfulness.

But we don't see that here. It says in verse 37, blessed are those servants whom the master finds awake when he comes. Another word for blessed is happy.

He didn't say, wow, they will be blessed. I will bless them when I come and I see that they're faithful. They're already blessed. My faith to be strengthened is for me.

Ask questions. Number one, why is the story set at night? Okay. Verse 36 says he was at a wedding feast.

[29 : 08] And that wedding feast and celebration would have been in the evening and the night. Why is the master leaving the wedding celebration? Now this is a big key.

Again, if you start to see all of these parts, it may be that that big idea that you initially saw, it's a big idea, but there's a bigger meaning when you begin to take things in the parable and meditate on them.

Take those nuances. Imagine the parable is a diamond. And if you just see one thought, then you're seeing one side of the diamond. You're seeing one facet, but holding it up into the light of what we already know to be true about God and Christ and the Holy Spirit and my sinfulness and my relationship to God.

Holding it up in that light and turning it, you can begin to see, it's still one diamond, but you can see another sparkle from another side or another facet.

So when you look at verse 36, it says they're waiting for him to come home from the wedding feast. Now that word has been translated most often by contemporary commentators as literally you leave off the wedding celebration and you come home.

[30 : 44] Quite simple, right? Well, let me ask you a question. Was the wedding feast over? Did it end and that's why he came home?

We're apt to think, well, that's the way it is with me. I don't tend, well, come to find out, I leave many, many times. I love to go to weddings, but I don't stay for, you know, after the reception.

And then I can tell you when they start with the Kaylee, I'm normally leaving, not because I don't like to watch, but there's no watching on the sideline with the Kaylee. They're pulling you, they're roping you in.

And I just know I'm going to have a sore arm the next day. But he left the wedding feast and it was in progress. All right, I hear some wheels turning now.

Why is the master knocking on his own door? Why doesn't he, as he pulls up into the yard, I'm home! Or why doesn't he just walk right in?

[31 : 43] Well, this can pertain to Revelation, where we find that Jesus says, when I come, I'm going to come knocking on your door for anybody inside that is listening, that is awake, that is alert, are expecting me.

Faith. They're expecting me to come. They're expecting my voice. They're expecting my knock. They're expecting to hear me. And it's like, they're just sitting there. I'm like, is he here yet?

Was that him? No, that was just, that was just the wind. Wait, was that him? He's knocking on his door so that he can discern those that are eager to receive him and those that have gone off their own way.

Even asleep. Why did he dress himself for service? Now. Now Jesus, as a good storyteller, this is the climax of our story.

He's, everything else is starting to crescendo right up to verse 37. The personal servants of the master are happy servants.

[33 : 00] Eager and expectant. The master knocks. You're home, you're back, you're back, oh that's great, and you're home a little bit early. I mean, isn't the wedding celebration still going on?

Yeah, yeah, yeah. I left off. I'm home. I'm home now. By the way, you guys sit down.

Sit at the table. They'd be reclining as they do. Sit down over here. I'd be right back. What, what, what, what is he doing?

And then he comes back. His loins are girded. That belt is cinched down. Sleeves rolled up.

And he says, I'm going to serve you. Every one of the listeners, every one of the listeners would be scratching their head as to, I've never known any master to do that.

[34 : 01] Not only do they not have to, but why would they want to? What kind of master, now that's the master I would love to have. Man, if I had that kind of master, service of that master would be so easy.

It would be a love relationship. It's as we sang earlier. That master doesn't call me servant. He calls me friend. That master doesn't say, hey, listen, I'm going to send, and I'm going to have one of my other servants serve all you servants.

Kind of like a Christmas holiday employee party. I'm going to have somebody else serve all you guys. No, he says, I personally am serving you because I want to feast with you.

You're sitting at the master's table and you're sitting, and it's not a one-off, but it's my friends, those that I love and those who love me.

Final thing is, what does he serve them? There's no mention of food here, is there? Well, commentators have two thoughts, and they, as good commentators and Bible scholars sometimes do, they say, it could be this, it could be that, but you know, it could be both.

[35 : 35] it could be that he brought takeaway from the wedding celebration. He could have been at this wedding celebration and this feast with his friends and his peers and said, I miss my mates, I miss my friends, and they're my servants.

I'm going to take some food, and I'm going to, it's going to taste better when I'm with them. linking Jesus to where he has said elsewhere in his, at the last supper, I won't eat and I won't drink again apart from being with you in paradise.

To say, it's just not the same without you. I want you. But the other idea is the Eucharist or the Lord's table, communion.

The food was him. The food was the master, his body, his blood. Now, these hearers would not have interpreted, they didn't have enough yet to understand that, but it could be just feasting on the master's presence with them and feasting on this gospel that the master would personally serve them by emptying himself, by sacrificing himself, and that with joy those who personally served him, who loved him, and served him out of love and not trying to earn his love.

They knew that the master loved him. And that's the gospel. That's the gospel that Jesus wants us to see because he says, I'm that master.

[37 : 27] And it's tucked right there in the parable, but you need all of that to draw out that meaning. And how does it change us? Think about their identity afterwards.

The disciples, they could say, you know, I need to measure my heart. Am I serving you simply for what I get or am I serving you because what I get and have is you?

Do I serve you out of love or do I serve you out of some sense of reward for a performance and achievement? Do I see Jesus? Do I see the beauty of this master?

He's yours, you know. If you are a Christian, then you're a disciple. And if you're a disciple, Paul would say, you're a slave to Jesus.

But what slave ever had so good a master? We want to enslave ourselves to this one who would even empty himself to die in our place.

[38 : 37] But he doesn't leave us there. He is now, there are opportunities, even now, where this master still comes through the Holy Spirit and through various means of grace, but he still meets us with his presence.

And he still serves us. And that all out of his great love. I told you that I would end with a personal story. And that is that I'm very, I'm very sad about Titus' passing and binge the arrangements that you and your family have had to make for your brother's passing.

My condolences. I really do understand a bit. It was approximately a year ago that my brother died. Quite unexpectedly.

And in helping with the arrangements, I'm one of three boys.

My baby brother was the executor of my brother's estate. My brother that passed away did not have a wife, did not have kids, but he had a little bit of substance.

[39 : 57] And to not go into any of the details a lot of that substance was linked to my father's estate who had passed away years earlier.

And so my brother and I sat down to talk about what do we do with Terry's stuff? What Terry's my brother that passed away inheritance?

inheritance? And my baby brother said, well, me. There's no you. Because I'm the executor of state, then it's all mine.

What would you do? What would you do if you were at that meeting and you thought, well, I didn't come to ask for anything, but I kind of thought you might split the inheritance.

inheritance. Well, Jesus was faced with that. Here in Luke earlier, someone came to Jesus and they said, Jesus, make my family member split the inheritance with me.

[41 : 03] And what does he do? He tells a parable. And he tells a parable about a rich fool who builds bigger barns and yet his life expires even in the night.

That parable held rich meaning to me for my faith and what I should do. It was that parable that allowed me to look at the inheritance and say, it's okay.

It's not about money. It's not about possessions. It's not about stuff. And it released me to allow me to mourn my brother's passing without being enraged because of some sense of do or rights against my other brother.

Parables, the gospel, holds promise for a richness of meaning in life, application for a strong faith.

So if all I've done today is to make you curious, to reread the parables and read it in a different light, to turn that diamond a little bit more, then I would be encouraged and I would feel like I've been faithful in coming to you.

[42 : 35] Take a deeper dive in this parable or pick one of your own, even this afternoon, and look at it in a deeper way, always with the expectation this has rich meaning for my life today and also for me to see the very beauty of Jesus in the gospel.

Amen.