

Waiting fruitfully

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[0 : 00] 2 Peter chapter 1 verse 21, for no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

Heavenly Father, we praise you that as we come to the Bible, although written by men, yet actually behind that, carried along and spoken to and inspired by your Holy Spirit.

Thank you that this is no mere human book, but a divine book. And we pray, therefore, that as we hear your word this morning, we pray that you would indeed speak to us powerfully by your Spirit and enable us to take it to heart, and especially to live our lives now in the light of the great return of the Lord Jesus.

And we ask it in his name. Amen. The reading today is taken from Matthew 25, verses 14 to 30.

4. It will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted to them his property.

[1 : 15] To one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. 5. He who had received the five talents went at once and traded with them, and he made five talents more.

So also, he who had the two talents made two talents more. 6. But he who had received the one talent went and dug in the ground and hid his master's money.

7. Now, after a long time, the master of those servants came and settled the counts with them. 8. And he who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five talents more, saying, 8.

Master, you delivered to me five talents. Here I have made five talents more.

9. His master said to him, Well done, good and faithful servant. 10. You have been faithful over a little. I will set you over much.

11. Enter into the joy of your master. 11. He also who had received the one talent came forward, saying, Master, you delivered to me two talents. 11. Here I have made two talents more.

[2 : 26] 12. His master said to him, Well done, good and faithful servant. 13. You have been faithful over little. I will set you over much.

14. Enter into the joy of your master. 14. He also who had received the one talent came forward, saying, 14. Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow and gathering where you scattered no seed.

15. So I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. 15. Here you have what is yours.

16. But his master answered him, You wicked and slothful servant.

17. You knew I reap where I have not sown and gather where I scattered no seed. 17. Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers. 18. And at my coming, I should have received what was my own with interest.

18. So take the talent from him and give it to him who has the ten talents. 19. For to everyone who has will more be given, and he will have an abundance.

[3 : 33] 19. But from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away, 19. And cast the worth of servant into the outer darkness.

19. In that place, there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Thanks very much, Pete.

Do keep Matthew 25 open before you, if you would. I think it's fair to say that the recent death of David Bowie a week ago today is quite clearly the news event so far of 2016.

I guess I hadn't really realized what an influential figure Bowie was until he died, and the press really made much of it. Even The Economist extended its normal one-page obituary to two, which is an honor I haven't seen extended to anyone else.

In accounting for Bowie's influence, the obituary in The Economist points to the way he captured the downturn in the spirit of the age, as the optimistic 1960s gave way to the pessimistic 1970s.

[4 : 45] In evaluating Bowie's greatest period of work in the 1970s, it says this, During this period, Bowie laid the future to rest in a grave of strange, powerful sound.

Much of the music was bleak, its synthesizers industrial, its guitars angry, its words disturbing. He felt he had at last captured a sense of yearning for a future that we all knew would never come to pass.

Bowie was so influential, at least in part, because he tapped into a deep sense of uncertainty and hopelessness about the future.

In this section of Matthew's Gospel that we're looking at together over these few Sundays, Jesus is addressing the question of what the future will bring. In complete contrast to the world's uncertainty about the future, Jesus speaks with clarity and with authority.

He will come again as judge and king. That day will bring division and it will bring judgment, but for his believing people, it will be a day of great joy, ushering in a glorious future.

[6 : 08] Jesus once again has the future in view in our passage this morning, and his concern is to make it clear how his people, a people of hope and a people of certainty, will live now in light of his certain coming.

Last week we saw that Jesus' people will be marked out by a faithfulness expressed in watchfulness. And this week in our passage today, Jesus sets out to show us that his believing people will be marked out by a faithfulness expressed in fruitful service.

The story is really quite simple. A wealthy man, verse 14, goes on a journey, and he entrusts his property while he's away to his servants, who were presumably actually his slaves, with the expectation that they would steward his wealth well during his absence.

Shrewdly, the master considers the ability of each individual servant, verse 15, and assigns each one a share of his wealth according to their capacity. We don't really know how much each one of these talents was worth.

A talent was a unit of weight rather than a unit of currency. If we're talking about a talent of silver, which seems most likely, then we're looking at pretty serious sums of money here.

[7 : 31] A talent of silver was probably worth about 20 years' wages for a day laborer, a few hundred thousand pounds in today's money. The two servants who were given the larger sums, five talents and two talents respectively, they wasted no time and they went at once, verse 16, and they traded with the money and they doubled it.

The servant who was given just the one talent, on the other hand, went and dug a hole and buried it in the ground for safekeeping. The master is away for a long time, verse 19.

Perhaps he's been off inspecting and checking on property in a far-off country, but eventually he comes back and he settles accounts with his servants. The servants who doubled their master's money got a warm commendation, verses 21 and verse 23.

Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little. I will set you over much.

Enter into the joy of your master. These two servants have proved themselves and they're promised now to receive greater responsibility in the future, more significant assets to steward.

More than that, they're invited to enter into the master's joy. Maybe he's having a banquet now that he's home. Maybe some kind of a party. Whatever it is, they're invited.

[8 : 58] They're included. But the picture for the hapless third servant, well, it's rather different. He's been looking on, watching the other servants give their brief reports, and receive their very warm commendations.

But he knows things will be different for him. So like the schoolboy who's been caught red-handed without his prep, he starts on the offensive, on the front foot.

It's not that the dog has eaten it. No, this excuse is really more of an accusation. Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you scattered no seed, so I was afraid.

And I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here, have what is yours. Without putting too fine a point on it, master, I've made no return, but it's really all your fault.

It's because you're such a bully. It's because you're so mean. So what I did was I buried your cash so I wouldn't risk losing it and incurring your anger.

[10 : 06] Here's your talent, safe and sound, have what's yours. It may be a bit dusty, but it's all in one piece. Given the circumstances, I think you'll agree I've behaved really quite wisely and prudently.

But the master isn't impressed, verse 26. You wicked and slothful servant. If you knew that I was like that, you should have at least put my money in the bank and got interest.

And so the money's taken away from this useless servant, verse 30. And he is cast into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

He's off the estate. He's out of a job. And he's sent somewhere truly dreadful. Well, that's the story. What does it mean?

Again, I think the basic significance of the story is pretty simple. As in the parable of the ten virgins, verse 1, this story is about the kingdom of God.

[11 : 03] And we're told that the kingdom, verse 14, will be like a man going on a journey. We're near the end of Matthew's gospel, and Jesus is soon going to die, rise from the grave, and ascend to heaven.

And he'll be gone for some time. Jesus has just been speaking about his departure and then his return back in chapter 24. So we don't have to think too long to realize that the master here is a representative of Jesus.

He is the one who is going away and who will one day return. And just as this master left talents with his servants, assets, resources in trust, so too the Lord Jesus has left us, his people, with resources, gifts, assets, things that belong to him that we hold in trust and we're to invest for his service.

Of course, the use of the term talent in common English to speak of a gift or an ability, well, it comes from this very story. That's the background. But the image itself is actually more general than that.

And it points to anything and everything you and I have at our disposal that we can use to serve the Lord Jesus and further the cause of the gospel.

[12 : 21] It includes our time and our money, our career, our networks of friendships at school, at work, in our neighborhood. It includes our home. It includes our possessions.

It includes our mental and our physical powers and our particular gifts for service. The ability to teach, maybe. A gift for hospitality. Gifts in music.

Gifts in evangelism. And all other gifts besides. It applies to everything that God has given us. All that we have. And all that we are.

The settling of accounts, verse 19, upon the master's return points to the day of judgment when the Lord Jesus will require an accounting from each one of us of how we've lived and how we've served.

The invitation to the master's joy, verse 21, well, that's an invitation to join him in his glorious kingdom. And the judgment of verse 30 is banishment to the place of eternal judgment.

[13 : 25] Hell itself. That's the story. That's its meaning. But what are we to make of it? What are the implications for us today? As I suggested back at the beginning, the story focuses on the master's concern for his servant's fruitfulness while he's away.

It's here to show us that Jesus expects his true people to live lives of faithful, fruitful service as they await his return. I guess there may be one or two here this morning who are still investigating the Christian faith, still weighing up whether to become a follower of Jesus.

Now, it's worth saying at the outset that if that's you, this parable has a really key insight for you. I think it's quite easy to get the impression that Christianity is essentially a free ticket to heaven.

We coast through this life, eventually die, but if we're Christians, we're on our way to heaven. But this passage shows us that Jesus is in the business of saving people who will be his servants.

Following Jesus, trusting Jesus, receiving salvation from Jesus will lead to service will lead to service of Jesus. And so a key question for you this morning is whether you'd be willing to do that.

[14 : 48] Three lessons then about living fruitfully as we await the coming of Jesus. And here's the first one. Fruitfulness matters more than giftedness. In the opinion of the master, fruitfulness matters more than giftedness.

When I came to England as a 19-year-old from Canada, one of the first lessons I learned was the difference between British and North American cultural attitudes to work.

Back at school in Canada, there was an unashamed respect for hard work. Boys at school generally took their hats off to peers who put in the hours to achieve results.

There was nothing particularly uncool about working hard. When I got to uni here at England, I was immediately struck by the casual attitude of my peers that they appeared to take to their work.

In my naivety, I was always impressed when certain peers who made out that they never did much of anything in the way of work seemed to achieve really quite good results.

[15:55] I assumed that they must be terribly clever. It took me a while to realize that these peers were actually working jolly hard, but they didn't care to advertise the fact.

Work was normally done behind closed doors and out of public view. It took a little while, but I came to realize that this was a culture that prized giftedness over effort.

To appear too hardworking wasn't really the done thing. It was far preferable to seem effortlessly brilliant. I mention that because the master in this parable is in this respect terribly un-English.

He doesn't seem to care at all about giftedness, but he cares a great deal about diligence in the use of the gifts one has. We see that very clearly in verses 20 to 23.

In verse 20, the servant with the five talents returns having doubled his money, and he receives the response of verse 21. Well done, good and faithful servant.

[17:01] You have been faithful over a little. I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master. In verse 22, the servant who had only two talents presents himself to the master, having doubled his more modest trust.

And strikingly, the master's response to him is identical. Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little. I will set you over much.

Enter into the joy of your master. The master made no distinction between these two servants, even though they had been entrusted with significantly different gifts.

He made no distinction between them because their use of their gifts in proportional terms had been identical. They both had made the most of what they had been given.

We need to take careful note of that point because the attitude of the master here, the attitude of the Lord Jesus Christ, runs so counter to our natural cultural tendency.

[18:04] We're dazzled by giftedness. But Jesus is concerned with fruitfulness. If it happens that we have been given significant gifts and abilities in one way or another, or we've been entrusted with significant resources or opportunities, our temptation could be just to coast.

We'll put in a little effort in evangelism, and we're just so natural at it, we see results right away. We give a small slice of our salary away to gospel work, but actually a small slice of a large salary still looks pretty impressive.

We make a fairly half-hearted attempt to prep our Bible study, but actually ours comes off better than most. If we think that effortless coasting in Christian service is okay because our gifts and our abilities are great, the Lord Jesus has a challenge for us and a wake-up call.

He is interested less in the final results and far more in our diligence in using what we've got. And the bottom line is this, if our gifts and resources are great, he's expecting more from us than he is from others.

Similarly, if you or I happen to feel that our gifts are few, it could be tempting for us not even to bother trying because we see how much more others can give and how much better they can serve.

[19:38] Why make sacrifices to give my gift of 10 or 20 pounds when I know that the person sitting next to me could cut a check for thousands without breaking a sweat?

Why bother with evangelism? I am so hopeless at it. And my friend just seems to have it in her DNA. And as we go down that line of thought further and further, how easy it could be to grow bitter and resentful.

The master's actually been a bit stingy with me. Why should I give? Why should I serve? We don't know for sure, but I just wonder if the servant with the one talent, the servant who refused to do anything with what he'd been given, I wonder if he felt exactly that same way.

Bitter. Resentful. Whether our gifts are many or few, it's vital not to misjudge the situation. The master is not concerned about the quantity of the results in absolute terms.

He is concerned about the fruitful use of what we've been given. He's interested to see a return on his investment. Fruitfulness matters more than giftedness.

[20:50] That's the first lesson here and the second is this. Fruitfulness means taking risks. Fruitfulness means taking risks. In the world of finance, investors are often classed under three categories according to their tolerance of risk.

The risk-averse, the risk-neutral, or the risk-loving. I wonder where you would naturally fall on that spectrum. What is your attitude when it comes to risk?

We might assume that Jesus would prize caution, that the way of godliness is surely to shun risk and play it safe. But one of the great surprises of the parable is that Jesus commends the risk-taker and condemns the risk-averse.

The past 12 months haven't been great on the stock market. If you follow the markets or work in the markets, you might be tempted to look at verse 18 and think that the man with the one talent didn't really make a bad call at the end of the day.

His assets were limited. He needed to be careful with what he had. In his own words, verse 25, he was afraid of a loss and of its repercussions.

[22 : 02] And a hole in the ground with 0% return is better than a speculative investment with a massive loss. It's not really a bad call. But whatever we might be tempted to think, what matters here is the master's appraisal and the master's evaluation.

And he is thoroughly unimpressed, isn't he? Verse 26, In his view, this cautious, risk-averse investor was not prudent, but wicked and slothful.

Having been left with the master's resources while he was away to do anything other than to invest and work and pursue growth, well, it's not prudent and it's not wise.

It's wicked. It's lazy. And soberingly, it leads to judgment. The talent is taken away, verse 28.

And the servant is cast into the outer darkness. Verse 30. The productive servants of verses 15 and 16, by contrast, went straight away and they traded with their talents to make more.

[23 : 10] Trading is an inherently risky business. Money is only ever safe in a vault or buried underground. The wicked servant, well, he was too afraid, too lazy for that, but these servants wanted to do their best for their master.

And so they took a chance and they got straight to work. No time wasted. And upon the master's return, verse 21, they were commended as good and faithful and they were invited to enter into his joy.

This month marks the 60th anniversary of the death of five of the most famous Christian martyrs of the 20th century.

Jim Elliott, Nate Saint, Ed McCully, Peter Fleming, and Roger Udarian were American missionaries who in the 1950s went with their young families to Ecuador to bring the gospel to the Hurani people. The story is well known, you probably know it. After months of dropping packages to build bridges of friendship with the Hurani people, they eventually established a camp on the ground hoping to make personal contact.

[24 : 18] But on January the 8th, 1956, the five men were brutally murdered by tribal warriors. What these five young men did was an incredibly risky thing.

It was the very opposite of burying their talents in the ground. And on first appearances, it looked like a complete failure, a total flop, a tragic loss.

Five young lives full of promise, cut terribly short. Five young wives and a number of young children suddenly left without a husband and a father.

And all that with the gospel never having reached the Hurani at all. Maybe the risk-averse servant was right after all. Bury the talent.

Play it safe. Maybe these young men should have stayed home. Maybe they should have settled down, got stable jobs, bought houses in the suburbs and pursued the American dream along with all their friends.

[25 : 16] Maybe they should have taken better care of their wives and their children. At least then they could have returned their talents to the Lord unscathed like that third servant and said to him, here have what's yours.

I've kept it safe for you. News of the death of these five men immediately captured global media attention. Something about their story captured the interest of the world.

It's hard to quantify this, but by all accounts, the death of these five young men acted as a huge catalyst to the cause of world missions in the decades that followed.

The tragedy gave a renewed focus and a renewed energy to the American church to invest financially in global gospel outreach. And scores of young believers were inspired to offer themselves for service as missionaries as a direct result of the martyrdom of these five men.

It's pretty certain that the death of these five young men in 1956 did more to spur on the cause of world mission in the second half of the 20th century than any other event, than any other witness.

[26 : 28] And who can say how many have heard the gospel as a result? Nate Saint, one of the martyrs, once said that people who don't know the Lord ask why in the world we waste our lives as missionaries.

They forget that they too are expending their lives and when the bubble has burst, they will have nothing of eternal significance to show for the years they have wasted. Little did Nate Saint or any of the others know just what they would be called to do and little could they know its eternal significance.

I wonder if you and I today are investing all that God has given us with our eyes on eternity. Are we willing to take risks, to do costly things in the prayerful hope that God might use our efforts to bring others to know him, to encourage his people, to bring glory to his name?

Where might you and I be in danger of burying our talents and just playing it safe? Perhaps we're playing it safe with our friendships at the moment, never taking the risk of speaking of the Lord Jesus for fear that it might just ruin things.

Perhaps we're playing it safe with our money, never stretching ourselves for the sake of the gospel, fearing that it'll undermine our security, fearing that it'll undermine our comfort.

[27 : 56] Perhaps we're playing it safe with our future, not contemplating how we might use the gifts that God has entrusted to us to serve the Lord Jesus in more fruitful ways, in different places perhaps, for fear that it might simply be too disruptive, too uncertain, too risky.

Perhaps we're in danger of playing it safe with our homes, wanting to protect them as our comfortable havens from the world. That's a strong instinct, isn't it? Rather than maximizing their usefulness for the gospel.

Some of us will be familiar with the name of Francis Schaeffer. Francis and his wife, Edith, established a ministry at their home in the Swiss Alps at Labrie.

And the aim of their outreach, really, and the aim of their work was to invite inquirers along to bring their questions about the Christian faith and to ask them in a relaxed environment.

If you know anything about Labrie, you'll know just how significant was their impact. But their whole ministry centered on hospitality. It centered around their home. And reflecting on the cost of that, looking back, Schaeffer wrote this.

[29 : 05] In about the first three years of Labrie, all our wedding presents were wiped out. Our sheets were torn. Holes were burned in our rugs.

Indeed, once a whole curtain almost burned up from somebody smoking in our living room. Drugs came into our place. People vomited in our rooms. Using home for the gospel was immensely costly for the Schaeffers.

But actually, what they did was they took the talent of their home, invested it, and the Lord in his goodness produced a result, a very significant return. It's worth pausing on that point, in particular, I think, because as a church plant with no church building, we at Grace Church actually rely very heavily on homes for ministry here in Dulwich.

And there's a cost involved in that, as many here know well. Fruitfulness means risk, and it may well look like loss in the short term.

Thirdly and finally, fruitfulness marks true faith. This parable of Jesus doesn't actually end the way I expected, that it should end. Normally, when that happens, when the Bible surprises me and doesn't say what I think it should say, I know I've got a sort of learning opportunity in front of me.

[30 : 27] My limited understanding is about to be stretched and reshaped by the truth of God's word. And that's just what I found at the end of this parable here in Matthew 25. I expected it to end something like this.

After the third servant gave his little spiel about burying the talent in verse 25, I expected the master to say something like this. Well, that was a bit useless of you, quite frankly.

We're going to dock your pay for the next six months, but next time I'm away, I'm going to give you half a talent, and we'll see what you make of it. But you better up your game. Now off you go. That's basically what I would expect.

That would seem proportionate to me. After all, it wasn't like the servant went away and spent the master's talent on wine, women, and song. He just didn't do anything with it.

It hardly seems a capital crime. But how does the story end? Verse 26, But his master answered him, You wicked and slothful servant. And he orders, verse 30, that the worthless servant be cast into the outer darkness.

[31 : 32] In that place, there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. It all seems really quite extreme. Is the parable telling us that the master is basically an ancient version of the most cutthroat investment banker the city has ever seen, decreeing death for staff who don't produce returns?

And more to the point, is Jesus saying that our salvation is ultimately dependent on whether we've produced returns for him?

A key to understanding, I think, comes in verse 24, where the servant says to his master by way of excuse, Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow and gathering where you scattered no seed.

The servant says that he has acted in a way that is consistent with his knowledge of the master. In his understanding, in his view, the master is a hard man and a thief, taking crops that do not belong to him.

But the problem is that that description flies in the face of everything we see about the master here in the story, not least in the immediately preceding verse. This master, far from being a hard man, entrusts his considerable wealth to his slaves and gives them an opportunity to make something of it.

[32 : 53] He warmly commends those servants who serve well, verse 23, rewarding them with more wealth to steward and even inviting them to share in his joyful celebration upon his return.

The whole encounter is shaped by fairness, even kindness, and generosity. At the heart of this third servant's failure is not incompetence, not first and foremost, but a lack of trust in the master, a lack of true knowledge of who he is.

Either he has deliberately misinterpreted him or he has simply misunderstood him. But in either case, he doesn't really know the master he serves.

As we move outside the world of the parable itself and consider that the master represents the Lord Jesus Christ, we see all the more how badly wrong this servant has got it.

The Lord Jesus is anything but hard in his dealing with his people. And there's nothing greedy or unfair about him, not on a single page of scripture. The servant who fails to invest his talents for the master's profit is the servant who doesn't know the master at all.

[34 : 09] And the servants who get straight to work, making the most of what the master has entrusted to them, well, they're the servants who understand the master. They know what he requires and they're ready to do his bidding.

Be easy, I think, for us to skim this parable quickly and reach the conclusion, essentially, that the faithful servants have earned their salvation while that final servant has failed to earn his.

But that would be to forget the bigger storyline of Matthew's gospel. The story is moving quickly and decisively now toward the cross. And everything that Jesus does and everything that Jesus says in the lead up to the cross is preparing us to understand and respond to his death and his resurrection.

This story is told, if you like, in the shadow of the cross. What will it look like to live for and serve the master as someone who has responded to his death and resurrection?

Who is trusting him for the forgiveness of sin through his death in their place? And who is looking forward to his second coming? What will it look like to live between the cross and the resurrection as someone who has saving faith in the Lord Jesus?

[35 : 26] Simple answer, it will look like faithful service. It will look like fruitful use of the gifts that God has given us. Fruitful service is a mark of true and saving faith.

It is evidence of knowing the master and knowing him truly. So as we finish, let me ask you, as I ask myself, does my use of what God has given me, time, money, gifts, opportunities, and all the rest of it, does my use of those things demonstrate that I know and trust the Lord Jesus?

Well, if it does, be encouraged, keep investing, keep serving in light of his certain return. But if it doesn't, may I urge you to examine again your heart and your life.

For some of us, we might feel, well, yes, I do know the Lord Jesus. I'm confident of that. But I do see a disconnect here in certain areas. I'm not using what the Lord Jesus has entrusted to me as fruitfully as I ought.

And if that's the case, we need to repent first and foremost. And we need to ask him for his help to put his talents to work in the most fruitful way possible. And perhaps this morning, some of us will need to go away and think through and pray through some particular areas where talents are

currently buried and need to be dug up and put to use.

[36 : 59] It could be that for one or two here, actually, you would have called yourself a Christian, but the idea of fruitful service of the Lord Jesus, well, that's never really figured into your understanding of the Christian life.

And perhaps you need to go right back to basics this morning and ask the Lord Jesus to give you such a true and saving faith that you might serve him and serve him fruitfully.

Let's be quiet for a moment and then I'll lead us in prayer. His master said to him, Well done, good and faithful servant.

You have been faithful over a little. I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master. God, our Father, we pray that you would give each one of us the grace to know and serve the Lord Jesus such that we might hear those words on the final day.

For his name's sake. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.