

A Parable on the Way

In 4 BC, Herod the Great died. This is the Herod who tried to kill the infant Jesus after his birth in Bethlehem. This is the Herod known for elaborate building projects throughout his kingdom, most notably the Temple in Jerusalem. This was the Temple Jesus would have known.

Herod ruled Judea for thirty-seven years. After his death, one of his sons, Archelaus, claimed title to the throne. In the last year of his life, Herod had willed succession to Archelaus, nullifying an earlier will naming another son, Herod Antipas, successor.

In order to secure the throne, Archelaus traveled to Rome to petition Caesar Augustus to ratify the will and name him king over all his father's holdings. He left his brother, Philip, to manage the affairs of state in his absence.

Herod Antipas went too. He took with him a delegation from the Jews who were resolute in their opposition to Archelaus. After Herod the Great's death, Archelaus had crushed a demonstration in the temple, killing three thousand Jewish citizens. The Jews rightfully feared what Archelaus might do if he had unlimited power.

After much political wrangling, Caesar appointed Archelaus ethnarch over Samaria, Judea, and Idumea. He would rule half of his father's kingdom. He also appointed Herod Antipas and Philip as tetrarches, each of them ruling a quarter of Herod the Great's former kingdom.

Archelaus returned to Jerusalem, assumed his throne and exacted brutal vengeance on those who had opposed him. This is the man who ruled when Mary and Joseph returned from Egypt. Remember that Joseph was afraid to go back to Bethlehem because of Archelaus? Archelaus was already infamous for his cruelty. God directed Joseph to take his family to Nazareth.

Within a few years, a delegation of Jews went to Rome to petition for the removal of Archelaus. Caesar Augustus granted their petition and banished Archelaus to the other end of the world, to Spain. Judea became a Roman province ruled by a Roman Governor. But the stories of his barbarism toward the Jewish people lingered in the nation's consciousness.

Keep that little slice of history in mind as you turn with me to Luke 19:12-27. Jesus, we remember, is on his way to Jerusalem. On the outskirts of Jericho, he healed a blind beggar. While passing through Jericho, he had an encounter with Zacchaeus, the chief tax collector. We looked at that last week. Now Jesus is on the road again. Listen to what happens.

Jesus has turned a well known historical event into an allegory. The outlines of Archelaus journey to Rome became the elements of Jesus' parable.

And note why Jesus told the parable in the first place: "...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" (Luke 19:11).

The crowd traveling with Jesus, including his own disciples, had ramped up their expectations. They were sure this was *the* moment! They anticipated Jesus arrival in Jerusalem as his unveiling as the Messiah. The excitement was electric.

Jesus told them this parable to help them understand that he was the king who would have to go away for a time to receive his kingdom. His coronation was not yet. There would be a time of separation during which his servants would work on his behalf and all humankind would have to come to terms with his sovereignty.

After that time away, Jesus would return to rule. God would vindicate his Son: "...at the name of Jesus every knee [will] bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Phil. 2:10-11).

When that day comes, there will be a reckoning. All people will be summoned to stand before him. His servants will give an account of their service. And rebellion will be crushed once and for all.

They didn't get it. Not until long afterward—after the crucifixion, after the resurrection, after Jesus' ascension back to heaven—did Jesus' disciples remember these words and make sense of them. What seems so obvious to us now would be understood only in retrospect.

We get the broad strokes of the parable. While Jesus is deflecting excitement about his possible immediate inauguration, he invests the bulk of his words to what happens in the interim. How should people, his disciples in particular, conduct themselves while he is away. And what are the outcomes. Jesus identifies three responses.

The first two come from his servants—those who claim to be his disciples. In the parable, the crown prince entrusts one mina to each of ten servants. A mina is a measure of weight for silver and gold and is equivalent in value to one hundred denarii. That is roughly the amount of money a blue collar worker could expect to make in three to four months.

The servants are charged with the responsibility for putting the money to work to add value to what they have received. That involves a certain amount of necessary risk. Investments and capital ventures can turn sour. These servants would be responsible for prudent, diligent effort on behalf of their king.

Translate that out of allegory and into real life for us. We are Christ-followers, servants who are kingdom-seekers. Jesus has distributed assets to each of us to put to work on his behalf while he is away.

What assets? What do we have that Jesus expects us to use on his behalf?

What comes immediately to mind is that familiar trilogy of time, talents and treasure. Time is the great equalizer. We all have exactly the same amount of time: twenty-four hours in every day. Nobody gets twenty-six hours, and nobody gets shorted.

As we manage our time, it matters that we invest it in opportunities that advance God's kingdom and gospel.

This is usually where preachers inject the idea of priorities into the discussion: God first, family second, church third, job fourth, etc.

Life isn't that neat. A former seminary prof wrote a book he called balancing life's demands. There are seasons in life that consume us. A job demands excruciating hours. Care for a sick loved one requires every spare moment. Moms, if you have kids at home, especially pre-school kids, keeping your home together is exhausting all by itself.

As servants of Jesus we are responsible for balancing life's demands in such a way that we create margins of time and invest them in serving Christ and his Kingdom. We are not all called to full time, vocational service, but we are all called to serve, and that takes a certain amount of time.

Talents are those God-given capabilities we have. These include natural talents, like music, technical skills, craftsmanship, athletic abilities, etc.. And they include those supernatural, spiritual gifts—divine enablements—distributed to every believer for enriching others in the church and in the world.

Jesus expects us to put our abilities to work on his behalf until he returns.

Our treasures represent our material resources. The Bible says: "...remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth..." (Deuteronomy 8:18). Everything we have is ultimately a gift from God. Even the ability to do our jobs and earn our keep is a gift from him.

It matters what we do with what we call *our* money and *our* stuff. Jesus expects us to be prudent managers of everything he has entrusted to us, putting our material resources to work for the sake of his Kingdom.

Why? Because life now is a proving ground of sorts. If we are faithful with our time, talents and treasures now—what Jesus calls "very small matters"—Jesus knows he can entrust us with true wealth and responsibility in eternity. Look at v. 15-19.

Some look at these two servants and conclude that one is more faithful than the other. One managed a one-thousand percent return on his master's money. The other only five-hundred percent. They look at the commendation for the first servant missing from the second.

We miss something cultural here. Teachers in the First Century typically condensed their thoughts. They didn't need to repeat every detail to make their point. Both servants did well. Both received greatly expanded opportunities as a reward for faithful service.

Our faithfulness now is determining our opportunities in eternity.

There is a third servant—v. 20-26.

This man doesn't like his master. He fears him as austere, harsh, and something of a fraud, someone who takes what isn't his.

So this guy wrapped his mina in a napkin and hid it. He didn't risk anything to advance his master's interests. He gave back what he received with nothing added to it.

Jesus judges him by his own words. This is key to our understanding. Some believe Jesus accepts his servant's evaluation of himself as a severe, demanding lord. Not at all. Jesus calls him wicked. Why, because even if he thought of Jesus in these terms, he was a fool to do nothing. He could at least have put the money in a savings account and earned something. He didn't have sense enough even to do that. He just sat on it.

Some Christ-followers don't very much like following Jesus. They give grudging attention to his bride, the church. They keep their time, talents and treasures for themselves. And even though they are glad they got their ticket punched for eternity, they don't like Jesus enough to spend time with him now or to serve him. Any service asked of them is seen as a mean-spirited demand. They just want Jesus to bless them, and otherwise leave them alone.

Jesus calls a servant like that wicked. He loses what he has and it's given to those who by their faithfulness, have earned their Master's trust.

Some believers, the Bible says, get into heaven by the skin of their teeth. Everything they have hoarded for themselves goes up in smoke before the judgement seat of Jesus. To their own loss they "...will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames" (1 Cor. 3:15).

Then Jesus talked about a third group of people. These have made it clear that they don't want Jesus to be their King. They are rebels to the end and at the end receive their just condemnation: "But those enemies of mine who did not want me to be king over them—bring them here and kill them in front of me."

Remember that Jesus is using the historical account of Archelaus as the framework for his allegory. History records that Archelaus was barbarous toward his political enemies.

Some are offended that Jesus used such grace-less language about those who have refused to receive him as their Lord. And we have to admit, by our cultural standards, Jesus is brutally

tough.

But we must face it: this is the outcome of living apart from Jesus. Those who reject Jesus now prove themselves to be his enemies. Whoever refuses to receive Jesus in this life will get what they want—and what they deserve—forever. In other places, Jesus himself explains that they face certain judgement—consignment to a place of eternal death, away from his presence.

It matters how we live now while Jesus is away. It matters that we live like faithful servants who anticipate his return. It matters that we invest our time, talents and treasures advancing Jesus' interests now.

The return in eternity will be all out of proportion to the investment.

And if we choose to hold everything tight to our chests, if we as Christians actually fear Jesus as if he were an uncaring bully bent only on snuffing out our fun, we risk losing everything that God wants so very much to pour out on his family in eternity.

I don't know how you assess your investments, but refusing Jesus now seems like a terrible trade.

In the parable of the ten minas, Jesus warns us to be prepared for his return. He urges faithfulness for his followers. He wants us to seek first his kingdom and glory so that he can bless us forever and entrust us with the true riches of God's eternal kingdom.

And he urges those who refuse him now to consider the outcome of rejecting him whom God has enthroned as Lord of all. Are you prepared for Jesus to certify your rejection permanently?

Today begins what Christians call Holy Week. It ends on Friday with the unfolding drama of our redemption: the crucifixion of Jesus. Jesus died on the cross for our sin. He paid our sin-debt and squared our moral account with God.

But Sunday comes. God raised Jesus from the dead. He is alive forevermore. And he is coming back.

May you live well in anticipation of his return. May the investment of your life—your time, talents and treasures—reflect your deep conviction that serving Jesus is worth everything. And if you have not yet acknowledged your need for Jesus, may God open the eyes of your heart to see "...the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ" (2 Cor. 4:6).