

## *The Lord of the Gift*

23<sup>rd</sup> Weekend in Kingdomtide – October 22/23, 2005

### Sermon Background Study

[In the days just before his arrest and crucifixion, Jesus challenges his disciples with a parable. What will they do after he leaves? What will they do with the great gift God has given them?]

*Matthew 25:14-30* (New Living Translation)

“Again, the Kingdom of Heaven can be illustrated by the story of a man going on a trip. He called together his servants and gave them money to invest for him while he was gone. <sup>15</sup>He gave five bags of gold<sup>1</sup> to one, two bags of gold to another, and one bag of gold to the last—dividing it in proportion to their abilities—and then left on his trip. <sup>16</sup>The servant who received the five bags of gold began immediately to invest the money and soon doubled it. <sup>17</sup>The servant with two bags of gold also went right to work and doubled the money. <sup>18</sup>But the servant who received the one bag of gold dug a hole in the ground and hid the master’s money for safekeeping.

<sup>19</sup>“After a long time their master returned from his trip and called them to give an account of how they had used his money. <sup>20</sup>The servant to whom he had entrusted the five bags of gold said, ‘Sir, you gave me five bags of gold to invest, and I have doubled the amount.’ <sup>21</sup>The master was full of praise. ‘Well done, my good and faithful servant. You have been faithful in handling this small amount, so now I will give you many more responsibilities. Let’s celebrate together!’

<sup>22</sup>“Next came the servant who had received the two bags of gold, with the report, ‘Sir, you gave me two bags of gold to invest, and I have doubled the amount.’ <sup>23</sup>The master said, ‘Well done, my good and faithful servant. You have been faithful in handling this small amount, so now I will give you many more responsibilities. Let’s celebrate together!’

<sup>24</sup>“Then the servant with the one bag of gold came and said, ‘Sir, I know you are a hard man, harvesting crops you didn’t plant and gathering crops you didn’t cultivate. <sup>25</sup>I was afraid I would lose your money, so I hid it in the earth and here it is.’

<sup>26</sup>“But the master replied, ‘You wicked and lazy servant! You think I’m a hard man, do you, harvesting crops I didn’t plant and gathering crops I didn’t cultivate?’ <sup>27</sup>Well, you should at least have put my money into the bank so I could have some interest. <sup>28</sup>Take the money from this servant and give it to the one with the ten bags of gold. <sup>29</sup>To those who use well what they are given, even more will be given, and they will have an abundance. But from those who are unfaithful, even what little they have will be taken away. <sup>30</sup>Now throw this useless servant into outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

*God gives us gifts that we can hardly comprehend. The questions are these: What will we do with them? What does God expect us to do with them? What is the tithe really all about?*

Sometimes God makes us seem smarter than we are. When we planned out the fall sermon series, I can’t really say that the last series, about risk-taking and water-walking, was ever seen as a lead-in to this fall’s stewardship series. But as I worked through Ortberg’s book and the background studies, it became clear to me that he had much to say about stewardship. Perhaps this is especially true for us this year. St. Andrew’s Finance Committee, composed of about twenty lay people, have urged us to talk more boldly about money this year, to be more frank, even to talk about tithing. And much of this will have to do with risk-taking, with our own willingness to step out of the boat so that we might experience the joy of giving

#### Tithing!?

If we are going to talk about tithing, we better understand the biblical tithe. God’s high priest, Melchizedek, accepted Abraham’s tithe, “one-tenth of everything” (Genesis 14:20). Abraham’s grandson, Jacob made a vow to God: “and of all that you give me I will surely give one-tenth to you” (Genesis 28:22). The Law of Moses stipulated that another tithe was to be used as a celebration, for the benefit of the population, the city, and for the Levites (Deuteronomy 12:17). Though Jewish rules and practices around tithing varied (they sometimes practiced double and even triple tithing!), it was always about giving back to God a portion of what God had given to God’s people.

Though tithing is not mentioned per se in the New Testament, it would be a mistake to think that the early Christians didn’t tithe. After all, the very first Christians were Jewish. They understood that all they had was a gift from God and they embraced God’s teaching’s about the actual practice of generosity.

(continued in the page two text box)

<sup>1</sup>The Greek here is “talent/*talaton*” which was a sum of money equivalent to about 15 years of a day laborer’s wage. Thus, these are vast sums that are being entrusted to the servants. Our use of “talents” to mean gifts or skills that a person possesses comes directly from this parable.

in ways that have eluded many of us. So, we begin with a story Jesus told his disciples about a master who entrusted his immense wealth to his servants.

### Three *kairos* moments

Before embarking on a long journey, a very rich man calls in three servants and offers each of them a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Each of them will be given the opportunity to manage a portion of the master's wealth. Now, the master is no fool. He knows that the servants vary in their abilities, as we all do. So the master entrusts varying sums to each of them.

#### Tithing (cont.)

The *Didache* illustrates the early Christians' commitment to tithing, as it is a late first-century manual of Christian beliefs and practices. It reads:

"You are therefore to take the first products of your wine-press, your threshing-floor, your oxen and your sheep, and give them as first-fruits to the prophets, for nowadays it is they who are your 'High Priests.' If there is no prophet among you, give them to the poor. And when you bake a batch of loaves, take the first of them and give it away, as the commandment directs. Similarly when you broach a jar of wine or oil, take the first portion to give to the prophets. So, too, with your money, and your clothing, and all your possessions; take a tithe of them whatever way you think best and make a gift of it, as the commandment bids you."

Of course, Jesus took some Pharisees to task for ever so carefully calculating and paying their tithe – but doing so from a cold heart. Tithing is not about rules. It's like the old question, "Is it pre-tax or after-tax?" If that is your question, then your heart hasn't yet grown to the right place. When asked about the tithe, C.S. Lewis replied, "I do not believe we can settle how much we ought to give. I am afraid the only safe rule is to give more than we can spare." Lewis understood that God is Lord of the Gift. A tithe concretely expresses our desire to return some of that gift. A tithe is an obligation of a joyful heart. God has always expected that his people will be generous with their time, talents, *and* their money.

Try to put yourself in the place of the servants. These are not servants as you and I think of them. These are slaves. Yet, each is trusted with more money than they could imagine. It isn't even of their own choosing. The master doesn't ask them whether they want the responsibility; the master simply places the treasure in their hands. The master thrusts each of them into a *kairos* moment. The only real question is how each will respond.

Two of the servants step up to the challenge, go to work, and make the most of what the master entrusted to them. However, the third servant buries the treasure in the ground. Seeing only risk in the treasure, the third servant cowers fearfully in the boat, refusing to step out and, thus, foregoing any chance to walk on water. He has no interest in serving the master, only in his own security. Not surprisingly, the master trust the first two servants with even more responsibility. But the third servant, the one who thought he was avoiding risk, is stripped of everything and cast out.

#### *Which servant are we?*

In Luke's telling of this parable (19:11-27), each servant is entrusted with a lot of money, but nothing like the vast wealth in Matthew's version.<sup>2</sup> Surely, Matthew wants us to grasp the immensity of the gifts that God has given each of us, gifts that begin with the life of his own son. Nothing we might ever do approaches the generosity of God. He is the Lord of the Gift, as Ortberg puts it.

The Lord of the Gift has given immense gifts to us all. Like the three servants, we vary in the nature and even the amount of the gifts. But, regardless of the size of the gift that God has entrusted to us, the question is what we'll do with it. Will we remember that all we have is a gift from

God? Will we step forward in faith, taking what seems to be risks so that the gifts entrusted to us do all the good that can be done? The servants held the master's wealth in trust. So are we trustees of God's gifts. Len Sweet and Harry Wendt put all this business about being trustees rather bluntly:

"When we place our so-called 'gift' on the offering plate, we are not giving God anything . . . We are merely getting our grubby little hands off what has always belonged to God. In short, we are not called to practice Christian giving, but Christian management and distribution [of God's creation], and this applies not merely to what we 'give' on Sundays, but to our total use of life as we manage this planet to the glory of God and for the good of all."

The question to me is pointed. Am I a faithful servant? Do I make productive use of all that God has entrusted to me? Do I respond out of love for my Master and a desire to serve? If so, then perhaps, when it comes to the money entrusted to me, I will grasp that even tithing is only a stepping off point.

<sup>2</sup>In Luke, the master gives the servants a *mina*, a few months' wages compared to the *talent*, 15 years' wages.

## Daily Bible Readings

*(more about God's many gifts)*

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p><b>Day 1 Genesis 17</b> God reiterates his promise of a people and a land for Abraham and gives him a sign of this covenant, circumcision.</p>	<p><b>Day 2 Exodus 19 &amp; 20</b> God gives his people the Law - this gift of God's teachings about how to live in right relationship with God and one another.</p>
<p><b>Day 3 Psalm 107</b> A lengthy psalm of thanksgiving for all that God has done for his people.</p>	<p><b>Day 4 Psalm 30</b> The psalmist praises God for all that God has done for him ( or her!)</p>
<p><b>Day 5 Ephesians 1:15-23</b> Paul prays that the Christians will come to know the riches of the inheritance that God has given them.</p>	<p><b>Weekly Prayer Concerns</b></p>

## Sermon Notes

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### October Book Recommendation

#### *The Drama of Scripture: Finding Our Place in the Biblical Story*

by Craig Bartholemew and Michael Goheen

Many Christians find it difficult to make sense of the Bible. We know a lot of stories and names but can't really see how they fit together in any meaningful way, or whether they even do. Who is Joshua and where does he fit in? What does the story of Moses and the Exodus have to do with Jesus and the Last Supper? Why is so much of Revelation grounded in the OT? What difference does it make that Jesus was Jewish?

Bartholemew and Goheen's book is one of the best I've found at conveying the full sweep of the over-arching biblical narrative. Told as a six-act play, the authors take us through the complete drama told in the pages of Scripture and help us to find our own place in it. It is well-indexed and I recommend it highly.

Available at *Inspiration*, the St. Andrew Bookstore

### Questions for Discussion and Reflection

This is a difficult parable for many of us. What did the third servant do that was so wrong? He may not have gone out and figured out how to double his master's money, but he also hadn't squandered it. He had kept it safe for his master. Perhaps part of the answer can be found in his response to the master – the servant claimed to have done it out of fear. But I don't think that is the full answer to the master's anger. If we are to be the light to the world, if we are to make disciples of all nations, if we are to feed the hungry and clothe the poor . . . can all that be done by taking the safe route? God has given us all gifts, of varying kinds and differing proportions. What are we to do with them? What does it really mean to put all we have to work for the furtherance of God's kingdom? Is the parable about our investment strategies or about how we use whatever gifts God has entrusted to us?

You might discuss this parable at length. What is your reaction to it? What is it that God has entrusted to us that we are not simply to bury in the ground? What we typically mean by our talents? Our time? Our money? What is really "ours" at all? What is your reaction to the notion that *everything* we have we simply hold in trust for God? What might change about our lives, our outlook, even our money if we view ourselves as God's trustees?

Finally, you might discuss the text boxes on tithing. Why do you think that God instituted the tithe in the first place? What does it signify that there are multiple tithes talked about in the Old Testament? Why do you think that the *Didache* taught tithing alongside instruction on baptism, Holy Communion, and other topics? Does it surprise you? How can we avoid turning the practice of tithing into legalism?