

The Parable of the Servants and their Minas. Lk 18 v 11-27

Pray.

In any given week we can find evidence of people who are using their gifts and have reached their full potential. I looked at these two (indicate pictures of Serena Williams and Novak Djokovic) and think how hard they've worked. How do some seem to find what they're made for and others not? A combination of zeal, perseverance, giftedness and good fortune, I suppose.

In this parable we see clues to God's expectation of his calling on our lives. Jesus tells this parable to the crowd gathered in Jericho, just after welcoming Zacchaeus into His kingdom. Some of the crowd would already be familiar with these 'stories of glory', these glimpses of a heavenly kingdom in the here and now. Jesus has travelled His own journey and is reaching the end of it as He nears Jerusalem. I like to think Jesus was so discerning, He knew just the story to tell for that particular crowd at that particular moment. I note here that the parable in Matthew 25 is slightly different, but I am going to stick closely to this one in Luke. It begins with the fact that people were expecting the kingdom of God to appear at once, which is why Jesus tells the parable. Some commentators suggest that the parable is based on historical fact:

(Quote from Bible Speaks Today Luke p.173-4)

At the death of Herod the Great, his son Archelaus had (like the nobleman) to undertake a long journey 'to receive kingly power' (Lk 19 v 12). He could not be king in Judea until his claims had been ratified by the imperial government in Rome. And there was a deputation of his subjects, like the one in Lk 19 v 14, which went to Rome to lodge a petition against his claims; the reason in this case was a deserved unpopularity. The gist of the parable is that the nobleman is away long enough for his citizens to reveal their real enmity to him and for his servants to make full proof of their responsibilities to him. It is only after a quite a long time that he returns 'in kingly power', and then he settles with both groups.

Nevertheless, we can clearly see that Jesus too, alludes to His own 'going away' and returning as king and the fact that the nobleman in the parable is away long enough for the servants to put the money to work also means He will be away for longer than the people think. In this parable each servant is given the same amount of money, in contrast to the parable in Matthew when each one is given 'according to his abilities'. Here, I believe Jesus teaches that we are all given a portion of God's grace and what we do with it depends on our own trust and willingness, obedience and commitment to 'put it to work'.

So why do we hear about two successful servants and one who does not do anything? I believe Jesus wants to encourage his listeners that whilst God's grace is available to all in equal measure, it can only do its work as we cooperate with Him, by His spirit, in His plans. By citing two servants, who successfully make more money - though not equal amounts - He is demonstrating God's acceptance of our service; our responsibility, faithfulness and productivity (whether by stewardship of our finances or our gifts). The way into the kingdom of heaven is 'putting what you have been given to good use'. It is described in The Parable of the Sower as 'yielding a crop an hundred times what had been sown'. Luke goes on to explain that these are those who: 'Hear the word, retain it and by persevering produce a good crop.

I have deep admiration for our mission partners, Tim and Rachel Green. Their calling to serve God amongst the Muslim community takes great courage, trust and obedience to God's call on their lives. They have had to face all kinds of perils as they have lived and worked in places like Pakistan. Now they have turned their focus to Malaysia. As I rub shoulders with colleagues and children in the Bangladeshi community in East London, I'm very aware of the challenges they must face sharing the gospel in a hostile environment. It takes courage, tenacity and love in abundance.

So what of the servant who didn't make anything? We are told in Hebrews 11 of a whole long list of faithful servants, who had their 'faith credited to them as righteousness'. This other servant is described as 'wicked'. The servant himself says 'I was afraid'. In the kingdom of heaven, being afraid is not an option.

Read: 2 Tim 1 v 7. 'For God did not give us a spirit of timidity and fear, but of power, of love and of self-discipline.'

It appears that this servant was not cooperative or obedient, but lazy and timid - even defiant! His relationship with his master had not developed.

In 1 John 4 we read: 'God is love.... Perfect love drives out all fear.'

I would encourage you to read the whole chapter.

What I want to ask is this: is my relationship with my master fully developed in all areas of my life?

The end of the story is harsh, but this servant is not punished... simply not rewarded. Of course not, because he did nothing to be rewarded for. The citizens (not servants), who rejected their king, met their end.

Returning to my illustration of Serena Williams and Novak Djokovic at the beginning. Even St Paul uses the parallel with athletes in his letter to the Philippians! These two did not get there just on their gifts alone, but on practising, working, using, persevering in and loving what they do, to get their reward. Our gift is God's grace and salvation, so that we can love and not count the cost.

So I'd like to sum up by reading the end of our passage from The Message written by Eugene Peterson:

'Risk your life and get more than you ever dreamed of. Play it safe and end up holding the bag!'

Amen.