

Matthew 25:13-21

Preached at Stone Church of Willow Glen by Rev. Fred Harrell

Sunday, October 10, 2024

Everything a Gift: The Foundation of Generosity

This parable is filthy rich. It has a LOT of money in it. A “talent” was one of the largest values of money in the Hellenistic world. The eight talents in the story represent over \$4 million, and that is just a smidgen of the Master’s holdings.

Now, if you think this sermon is just about giving to Stone Church with consecration Sunday being next week, you'd be right. But that's not the only thing. And it's not the major point, because there's a reason Jesus talked so much about money and possessions. One out of 10 verses in the Gospels is about money and possessions. Jesus knows and sympathizes with the anxiety and challenge that money is to all of us.

Money is a measure of the power that we have. And we typically don't do so well with power. When there is wrongdoing, what do people say? “Follow the money.” Because it can bring that kind of corruption.

Three questions about money that arise from this story:

First: Where does it come from?

Verse 14, when Jesus begins to tell this parable: He says the man “summoned his slaves and **entrusted** his property to them.” No matter how much or little you have, all is a gift from God.

Somebody says no, no, no, wait a second, you don't know how hard I've worked. You don't know, I have worked my *whatever* off for what I have right now. You don't understand. First of all, I believe you. I respect this immensely.

And — it's still all a gift. Every breath we draw is a gift to do anything we've ever done. All of it is from God. If you inherited it — why weren't you born in abject poverty in the 12th century? Why do you have the health to do your job? Or to have done it for many years?

If we trace everything we have back to God, you begin to ask “Why me? Why do I have any resources, great or small? Why do I have it? Is there a purpose for this money greater than just increasing my comfort and accumulating stuff?”

And by the way, the more you have the harder it is to give. If you are thinking, “I'll give one day when I've made a lot of money,” the stats show that the more money you have the less you sacrificially give.

Two options:

1. Money is a gift from God.

OR

2. Money is a measure of my self-worth.

Which of those options lead to health? Flourishing for all?

Big Idea: It all belongs to God.

Second: What do I do with it?

If the money is not ours, if it IS a gift from God, what do I do with it?

I begin to see myself as a trustee or steward of this.

What if someone offered you their large estate and asked you to be their trustee, directing you to invest it in specific ways? If you then used that money to buy oceanfront property on Pebble Beach, what would you be called? Not greedy or miserly, but a thief! You could even face jail time for that. This is why the Bible uses such strong language about giving. In Malachi, the prophet states that withholding your gifts is akin to "robbing God."

As a trustee, you must follow the owner's directions. Those who 'bury their money' are not called "frugal", they are called lazy and wicked. Strong medicine.

Years ago, I was invited to a panel at the Commonwealth Club on homelessness as the token religious voice. I was terrified. The panel included Gavin Newsom, then a supervisor running for mayor, a leader from a free clinic in Haight Ashbury, a Boston policy expert on homelessness, and a police officer from a challenging area. For most of the hour, I just listened until someone finally asked, "What do you think, Reverend?"

I blurted out, "All the funds necessary to tackle these issues are already in San Francisco. The real challenge is inspiring people to recognize their responsibility to invest in our city rather than using it as a personal playground. What spiritual process can help individuals see money not as a measure of worth, but as an opportunity to bless those in need?"

Silence in the room. Gavin Newsom leaned into his microphone and said, "no more questions for me after that answer." And there was some nervous laughter. I also invited everyone to come to my church at the event, so there's that.

Friends, it's our moment to see ourselves as trustees and stewards to invest in our community to give of ourselves to see it thrive. For 78 years, Stone Church has served Willow Glen and greater San Jose. It has been on the forefront of social justice. It has been a blessing to many. Will you invest to see what God might do through us in the year ahead?

Big Idea: It all belongs to God.

Big Idea: We're responsible to be God's trustee so we have to invest.

3rd: How do I enjoy it?

Note the word “joy” in this parable:

“Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents.” His master said to him, “Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.”

Isn't that beautiful? God does not tell us to do this to earn God's approval or to get God to like us back but because God wants to relationally partner with you in healing the world and in so doing, share in God's joy.

To help bring renewal — emotionally, socially, spiritually, and physically — to this city, invest in what God loves, including the local church. Yes, the church can be messy because it involves people, but that's where you find relationships and accountability and support when life goes sideways.

Absolutely invest in other things that bring healing. Terely and I certainly do. But it's after we have given 10% of our gross salary to our church, which is the pledge we have made to Stone Church as well. We love all these other organizations, but they are not designed to invest back into us. They don't know me and they are not asking how we are doing and they won't be there for me when life hits the wall, but my local church will be, and has been for many of you.

I've met with so many of you to hear your stories. Often I'll ask “Why do you go to Stone Church?” The answers:

- The church made our family meals for months on end when I was diagnosed with cancer
- The church stood beside me when my marriage fell apart
- The church helped me through some of the greatest losses of my life
- I wouldn't know what to do myself without this community's support
- When my family was left to go it alone, this church welcomed us with open arms

The power of the local church should never be underestimated.

Big Idea #1? : It all belongs to God.

Big Idea #2? : We're responsible to be God's trustee so we have to invest.

Big Idea #3?: God has plans for your money, and those plans will result in you entering into God's JOY.

Quickly, friendly reminder: The motivation for all of it is the generosity that Jesus Christ has extended to you. In many ways, when we gather at the table we are celebrating the generosity of Jesus in our community. The act of sharing a meal embodies hospitality, generosity, and justice, prompting us to live out our faith in practical ways. Like giving.

Here's my counsel: Start where you are. Start where you can. And you can begin to know the liberation of opening your hands and being a conduit of God's love and grace and forgiveness in this world.

Amen.