

IT'S TIME WE DECIDE FOR OURSELVES

MATTHEW 25:14-30

"Again, it will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted his property to them. To one he gave five talents of money, to another two talents, and to another one talent, each according to his ability. Then he went on his journey. The man who had received the five talents went at once and put his money to work and gained five more. So also, the one with the two talents gained two more. But the man who had received the one talent went off, dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money.

"After a long time the master of those servants returned and settled accounts with them. The man who had received the five talents brought the other five. 'Master,' he said, 'you entrusted me with five talents. See, I have gained five more.'

"His master replied, 'Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!'

"The man with the two talents also came. 'Master,' he said, 'you entrusted me with two talents; see, I have gained two more.'

"His master replied, 'Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!'

"Then the man who had received the one talent came. 'Master,' he said, 'I knew that you are a hard man, harvesting where you have not sown and gathering where you have not scattered seed. So I was afraid and went out and hid your talent in the ground. See, here is what belongs to you.'

"His master replied, 'You wicked, lazy servant! So you knew that I harvest where I have not sown and gather where I have not scattered seed? Well then, you should have put my money on deposit with the bankers, so that when I returned I would have received it back with interest.'

" 'Take the talent from him and give it to the one who has the ten talents. For everyone who has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him. And throw that worthless servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'

One of the most stressful times of the year is upon us-the holiday season, and the stressors for many this year will be even worse than usual. For those who will be celebrating Thanksgiving and Christmas for the first time following the death of a loved one is particularly hard. For those who are worried about their job or who are looking for a job it will not be easy. For those with strained relationships, painful childhood memories, or simply those whose plates are too full and credit cards at their limit, the holidays can be anything but joyous.

In just 12 days it will be Black Friday, one of the biggest shopping days of the year. They call it Black because it is the day when retailers begin to get their profit margins into the black. Department stores around the country will open at 5 AM to accommodate the mad rush of shoppers, and sleepy store clerks will greet you with either Happy Holidays or Merry Christmas, depending on the correct political fad for the year. Some stores will even be open on Thanksgiving, with poorly paid clerks giving up their time with family in order for Department stores to maximize their profits.

Sometimes it is just easier for us Christians to go with the flow. We know that the season is full of over eating, indulging in too much alcohol, and spending beyond our means, but we find it too hard to try and go against the tide of cultural expectations. Is it, then, any wonder that we find ourselves stressed out and miss the joy that should accompany the season? We have too many parties to attend, decorations to hang, cookies to bake, too many perfect gifts to buy, too many relatives to visit, too many cards to write, and too many bills to pay.

You've probably heard the story of a woman who was shopping with her two children. After many hours of looking at row after row of toys and hearing both her children asking for everything they saw on those many shelves and other things in the store, she finally made it to the elevator with her two kids.

She was feeling what so many of us feel during the holiday season time of the year: overwhelming pressure to go to every party, every housewarming, taste all the holiday food and treats, getting that perfect gift for every single person on our shopping list, making sure we don't forget anyone on our card list, and the pressure of making sure we respond to everyone who sent us a card.

Finally the elevator doors opened and there was already a crowd in the car. She pushed her way into the car and dragged her two kids in with her and all her purchases. When the doors closed, she couldn't take it anymore and stated,

“Whoever started this whole Christmas thing should be found, strung up and shot.”

From the back of the car everyone heard a quiet calm voice respond, “Don’t worry, we already crucified him.” For the rest of the trip down the elevator it was so quiet you could have heard a pin drop.

In 2006 a poll was taken that showed that people who never attend worship spend about \$850 on Christmas gifts, while those who attend weekly spend \$800. In other words, attending worship regularly has little impact on how we spend our money. If that statistic holds up, then St. Nick trumps the baby Jesus in setting the values of Christmas. We need a serious re-examination of how we spend money, and according to this text, *whose* money we spend.

This parable reminds us that the money we have is not our money for us to spend as we wish. All that we have is a gift from God, given to us to further God’s kingdom here on earth. What we do with what we have been given is important, and we must each decide for ourselves what we will do with what we have been given. How we spend our money says a lot about our relationship with God.

The parable tells us that the servants know God and that God knows the servants intimately. The parable also tells us that there are essentially 2 responses to handling the gifts we have been given. The first response by two of the servants is to love and to fear God, and thus to use the money in such a way to reflect their desire to please God. The second response by the other servant comes out of attitude of fear of God. Rather than doing anything with what God has given to him, he essentially sits on it and does nothing. He is afraid of doing anything, so instead of taking any risks for fear of angering God, he does nothing with the gift.

Fear is a scary word. To fear God conjures up frightening images of God. Jonathan Edwards, considered to be the father of the Great Awakening in the 18th century in America, preached a sermon in Enfield, CT on July 8, 1741, where he coined the terrifying phrase “Sinners in the hand of an angry God.” But to truly fear God means to respect God, to have reverence, to recognize that God is the creator. To fear God means that we hold God up to be more powerful than the world, and more worthy of our worship.

When it comes to personal finances, we might ask if our spending patterns demonstrate that we both love and fear God, only fear him, or sadly, neither.

And as a link to the upcoming Christmas season, let’s begin to think *today* how

God would want us to spend money this holiday. Which of these sounds more like talent-burying? Sitting alone in front of the computer after the kids fall asleep to purchase the newest electronic toys, or taking the children to the store to have them pick out a winter coat for another kid their age who's in the foster care system?

Here are some other suggestions:

- Create a Christmas gift budget that is 50 percent smaller than last year.
- Everyone in the family draw names and buys a gift for only one person.
- Put a \$50 spending limit on each person in the family.
- Limit the number of gifts the kids receive to one from the parents and one from each set of grandparents, and tell them three gifts were good enough for Jesus.
- Don't exchange gifts altogether for just one year. Reflect on how it impacts you and have a family discussion about it the day after Christmas.
- Give namesake charitable gifts through an organization like Heifer Project.
- Have the family choose a cause or need toward which they want to redistribute Christmas spending.

Visit a homeless shelter, soup kitchen, or a nursing home and spend time with a resident.

Whatever it is that God has blessed you with, discover new ways to use those gifts to be a blessing to others.

In your bulletin is a song I would like us to sing to get us into the mood for the Holiday season. The song is sung to the tune of God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen.

*Slow down, ye frantic shoppers, for there's something we must say
If you would spare a moment, all the stores would go away
Big business has been telling us what Christmas means today
Now it's time we decided for ourselves, for ourselves
Yes it's time we decided for ourselves.*

*To some folks Christmas means a time for gathering with friends
And enemies might take it as a time to make amends*

*But TV says it's time for pricey gifts and selfish ends
Now it's time we decided for ourselves, for ourselves
Yes it's time we decided for ourselves.*

*Some people feel that Christmas is when Jesus makes a call
For others it's a time to stress good will and peace to all
But advertisers tell us it means Santa's at the mall
Now it's time we decided for ourselves, for ourselves
Yes it's time we decided for ourselves.*