

SCRIPTURE READINGS AND SERMON

Twenty-Fourth Sunday After Pentecost

November 15, 2020

Psalm 90:1–12 (ESV):

1 Lord, you have been our dwelling place
in all generations.

2 Before the mountains were brought forth,
or ever you had formed the earth and the world,
from everlasting to everlasting you are God.

3 You return man to dust
and say, “Return, O children of man!”

4 For a thousand years in your sight
are but as yesterday when it is past,
or as a watch in the night.

5 You sweep them away as with a flood; they are like a dream,
like grass that is renewed in the morning:

6 in the morning it flourishes and is renewed;
in the evening it fades and withers.

7 For we are brought to an end by your anger;
by your wrath we are dismayed.

8 You have set our iniquities before you,
our secret sins in the light of your presence.

9 For all our days pass away under your wrath;
we bring our years to an end like a sigh.

10 The years of our life are seventy,
or even by reason of strength eighty;

yet their span is but toil and trouble;
they are soon gone, and we fly away.

11 Who considers the power of your anger,
and your wrath according to the fear of you?

12 So teach us to number our days
that we may get a heart of wisdom.

First Reading: Zephaniah 1:7–16 (ESV):

The Day of the Lord Is Near

7 Be silent before the Lord GOD!

For the day of the LORD is near;
the LORD has prepared a sacrifice
and consecrated his guests.

8 And on the day of the LORD's sacrifice—
"I will punish the officials and the king's sons
and all who array themselves in foreign attire.

9 On that day I will punish
everyone who leaps over the threshold,
and those who fill their master's house
with violence and fraud.

10 "On that day," declares the LORD,
"a cry will be heard from the Fish Gate,
a wail from the Second Quarter,
a loud crash from the hills.

11 Wail, O inhabitants of the Mortar!
For all the traders are no more;
all who weigh out silver are cut off.

12 At that time I will search Jerusalem with lamps,
and I will punish the men
who are complacent,

those who say in their hearts,
'The LORD will not do good,
nor will he do ill.'

13 Their goods shall be plundered,
and their houses laid waste.
Though they build houses,
they shall not inhabit them;
though they plant vineyards,
they shall not drink wine from them."

14 The great day of the LORD is near,
near and hastening fast;
the sound of the day of the LORD is bitter;
the mighty man cries aloud there.

15 A day of wrath is that day,
a day of distress and anguish,
a day of ruin and devastation,
a day of darkness and gloom,
a day of clouds and thick darkness,
16 a day of trumpet blast and battle cry
against the fortified cities
and against the lofty battlements.

EPISTLE: 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11 (ESV):

The Day of the Lord

1 Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers, you have no need to have anything written to you. 2 For you yourselves are fully aware that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. 3 While people are saying, "There is peace and security," then sudden destruction will come upon them as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and they will not escape. 4 But you are not in darkness, brothers, for that day to surprise you like a thief. 5 For you are all children of light, children of the day. We are not of the night or of the darkness. 6 So then let us not sleep, as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober. 7 For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, are drunk at night. 8 But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. 9 For God has not

destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, 10 who died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep we might live with him. 11 Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing.

THE GOSPEL - Matthew 25:14-30 (ESV):

The Parable of the Talents

14 “For it will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted to them his property. **15** To one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. **16** He who had received the five talents went at once and traded with them, and he made five talents more. **17** So also he who had the two talents made two talents more. **18** But he who had received the one talent went and dug in the ground and hid his master’s money. **19** Now after a long time the master of those servants came and settled accounts with them. **20** And he who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five talents more, saying, ‘Master, you delivered to me five talents; here, I have made five talents more.’ **21** His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master.’ **22** And he also who had the two talents came forward, saying, ‘Master, you delivered to me two talents; here, I have made two talents more.’ **23** His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master.’ **24** He also who had received the one talent came forward, saying, ‘Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you scattered no seed, **25** so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here, you have what is yours.’ **26** But his master answered him, ‘You wicked and slothful servant! You knew that I reap where I have not sown and gather where I scattered no seed? **27** Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and at my coming I should have received what was my own with interest. **28** So take the talent from him and give it to him who has the ten talents. **29** For to everyone who has will more be given, and he will have an abundance. But from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. **30** And cast the worthless servant into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’

Sermon 44 – Twenty-Fourth Sunday After Pentecost

“Trust Fund Talents”

Matthew 24:14-30

Dear friends,

On to the parables this week. Matthew serves us up a bit of a doozy, it isn't ten virgins but it does deal with some of the same themes. Christ is near the end of His tenure, and is making important points while He does it, and this falls into the same theme of ending and readiness that governs this whole time for year for us Christians. Parables can be tricky beasts, they were intended to be after all, and Jesus would have us ask ourselves some critical questions. It's pretty darn clear the master is God and the servants are us, His children and servants on this Earth. So what is the master concerned with? Is what the servants do with their money important? Finally, the last servant, what is it that separates him from his fellows?

As I said, this is the last. It is the last for our year here in time, it is the last things that Jesus has to say, and it is about the last times that we humans will experience. For most of us, this is probably going to be the day of our death, though we do not know when Christ will return for sure. When we die we will be greeted with the judgment, our judgment, and that is what this is about. Remember that Jesus is dealing with an escalating amount of frustration and outrage at His words and conduct. He has nothing to lose except His life, and that is part of His goal as well, so He keeps saying the hard words that need to be said. He does this because He knows the human heart. He knows we aren't fond of Jesus, we aren't fond of God, indeed, we dislike anyone else being in control of our life. It's our life. Let me run it my way, God.

I'm not going to quote all of this. It's somewhat on the lengthy side, it was just read for you, so I'll take your leave to summarize this. Again, God is the master, we Christians are his servants. The master leaves, as Jesus left us, and entrusts His servants, the church, with His property. One gets a lot, another gets less, and the third gets a little bit. Each of these servants does something different with it. The one who gets five talents goes out and earns five more. The guy who got two, earns two. Doubling of the investment there. Good business sense.

I was going to do this later, but it's coming out now. The analogy isn't great because we haven't received anything physical from God. God doesn't actually give us – the church – His money to invest in the traditional way that human beings can do that sort of thing. The economic illustration makes sense, but the church doesn't have God's money. We say that this building, my job, and pretty much everything we do belongs to God, but it was human work and human effort that actually made this stuff. You guys put your money in, and viola we have this building, myself, and other assorted conveniences. So it's not money that God gives us, even though God gives us money.

So what does God give us? Think of the Great Commission, think of Jesus' words to the apostles, especially to Peter. He gives us His Word, His message. He gives us things to say, to teach, and to remind ourselves of. He tells us about our history, He tells us about our hearts, our sin, and the ways He's redeemed us. He gives us the things we can do to connect people to that forgiveness, like Baptism and the Lord's Supper. Other than those physical things, all we have, really, is what we teach and what we believe. That is the investment that God has made in each one of you, bringing these ideas to your mind and your heart and keeping them

strong in both. He has changed you through that teaching, through those ideas, changed your heart, forgiven your sins, given you purpose. All of that is what Jesus is talking about through the parable. We as a church don't have much else to offer. We can do nice things for our community and the people around us, I guess, but everyone can do that. We can have good fellowship, friendly relationships, but you can get those anywhere. The church is for Jesus, for getting Him, remembering Him, learning more about Him, and so on and so forth. So we are invested with the talent of faith. That's what our talent is, our faith, what we know, what we believe.

Ok so how do you invest and trade in something like that? This is where the business angle gets confusing. These first two servants invested, traded, the words used are very businessy and that's not in any way what we do. We teach the Word of God. We worship God in spirit and truth. We safeguard that truth from the lies our society chooses to think are meaningful, even when they change every week. We can do all that, we can teach, we can share, we can just talk in general. But not much else. So what does it mean for a Christian to be a good investor? Make good use of His Christianity?

This is where our use of the word "talent comes into play. God puts you with people in places. As incredibly reductive and banal as that sounds, it is something we shouldn't forget. You have gifts, you have means, you have all kinds of things to offer the people around you. These are ways you can use yourselves to benefit them. If you have something to say, say it. If there's something you can do, do it. If there's something you can contribute, contribute it. Your talents may not be talent-show worthy, they may have rusted from time, overuse, underuse, or

whatever, but you have them and God wants you to use them. He gave you them to benefit others.

All that sounds fine, very piously Christian, but there's something to answer that is keyed in to balancing all this out in a healthy way. We have to have a look at this last servant. What did he do wrong? Why this reaction? Let's have a look. So this last servant gets the least amount, one talent, which is not Middle-eastern chump change but still the smallest. The servant's problem isn't what he does, though. It is *why* he does what he does, which is something God cares about a great deal. Notice how little the master cares for the amount. Five talents guy makes another five, master is happy. Two talents guy makes two, master is happy. The amount is not an issue. But then he comes to one talent guy, and things change, but its not the amount. One talent guy buries the talent, and when he returns the talent, he has this to say to the master: **“Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you scattered no seed, 25 so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here, you have what is yours.”**

This servant doesn't want the talent. He doesn't want the obligation. He doesn't want anything to do with his master, and he actually tells the master to his face, which is perhaps courageous if a little bizarre. The thrust of the servants speech is “take you're money, I didn't want it anyway. You scare me because you're mean, you're unjust, dishonest, and I don't want to be in hock to you anymore.” This servant does not trust or like his master, and that is what earns him his condemnation. He thinks his master is mean, untrustworthy, even evil.

To the point. God is not a taskmaster. God is not a bad boss, who is looking for any excuse to chisel away at your retirement, vacation benefits, or what have you. God is not looking to catch you in a gotcha or do whatever it is that our sinful minds can conjure when we think of Him. This is the unbelieving heart that speaks, and we should not listen. I'm not accusing you of thinking this, far from it, but I'm reminding you that God is not looking for what you do, He's looking for what you think and *why* you do what you do. The faithful person – you lot – trusts God, and it is passages like this that remind us how incredibly important that is to God. If God were a boss, He could find much better employees than you or I. If God were concerned with results, first and foremost, then why are we here? He could get results so much more easily by finding better people, making angels do it, or just doing it His own darn self. I spent some months of my schooling kinda flabbergasted by the fact that God involves us in His plans at all. I echoed the tendency of this unfaithful servant if not the exact words. If saving souls and teaching the Christian faith and all that is so important, God, go do it yourself. I'll just screw it up. But parables like this show how misguided I was in thinking that. God isn't doing this because He wants to see your bottom line, God isn't doing this for the result, He's doing it for the process. He involves you because it delights Him to do so, He takes joy from the relationship that He has with you even when the output of your side of the relationship is so uneven. If God gave report cards, our grade point average would be abysmal. But God isn't about that. That's not why He involves you in His missions, that's not why He brings you into His church. What delights God is your trust in Him, in all circumstances. What delights God is your dependence on Him, your relationship with Him, your *faith in Him*. Not just because that faith brings you Jesus and accomplishes God's goals, but because our God is a

personal God, not an impersonal boss who wants the results sheet and nothing else.

Again, you are Christians. You have this. Why say it? Because the world operates on this kind of efficient, get 'er done formula. God doesn't care how you get it done, or what you get done. He cares about you and the spirit of your service. He wants you to serve joyfully, however you serve, He wants you to serve because you care about Him and His people. Attitude is more important to God than output. That's terrifying for me, because I have a terrible attitude and I have always found it easier to control what I do rather than how I feel about something.

Take it from someone who has been this wicked, slothful servant, who spent more years in that mindset of God than I care to admit. You are here, wherever you are, because God wants you to be here. That may be burdensome as all get out, I get it, but God isn't doing this to slot you into some kind of machine. God is doing this to nurture your faith and trust in Him, to burn out that old sinful mistrust. I have spent years in places I never wanted to be, and God continues to insist that this was a good thing. The parable of the talents shows us why. Wherever we trust God, we are in a good place. Whenever we trust God, we have used our talents well, and invested His gifts to us in a way that delights Him.

Amen.