

IN BUSINESS WITH GOD

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

I kid you not. If you want to know how to hide your money in your back yard, go to www.ehow.com and read an article called “How to Hide Money in Your Yard.” According to Lily Mae, you’ll need: zip-top plastic bags; an air tight canister; duct tape (optional); a shovel; and sod or grass seed (optional). Basically, the article says: wrap your money and place it in a water-tight container; dig a hole in the ground; put the bag in the hole; fill in the hole and cover it up.¹

Obviously, Servant #3 couldn’t and didn’t need to go to www.ehow.com to find out how to hide his master’s money in the ground. It’s tempting to feel sorry for Servant #3, the one-talent servant. After all, he didn’t lose his master’s money. He actually practiced a common, rabbi-recommended and completely acceptable strategy for protecting money: By burying his master’s money in the ground, he not only saved the money but he also protected and excused himself from any responsibility for what happened to the money.

That seems to be the point of this story Jesus told — in line with the observation, “we’re supposed to use what God has given us.” By playing it safe, Servant #3 showed his hand. He was more concerned about himself and his own safety than using what his master had given him to care for in his absence. It seems reasonable to assume that Servant #1 and Servant #2 took some risks with what their master had entrusted to them. Wouldn’t you love to hear the master’s reaction if the story had said something like, “And the one with two talents also came forward, saying, ‘Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have one and a half talents to return. I used what you gave me, and this is what I have to give you’”? Based on the master’s response to Servant #3, we might expect that the master would have commended Servant #2 for at least trying, even if he lost some money.

In an article from www.money.com called “Why There’s No Such Thing as Risk-Free Investing,” R.S. asks, “What is the best no-risk way to invest my \$500,000?” (It’s kind of ironic that R.S. is from Las Vegas!) The answer to R.S.’s question is, “All investing taking some form of risk, even if it’s not apparent.”² A similar article at www.money.cnn.com advises C.A. that “No investment is completely risk-free. When you invest with the goal of avoiding one risk, you necessarily open yourself up to others.”³

So, is this parable about sound investing and protecting and increasing your boss’s assets? Is this parable teaching Christian or biblical money management skills? Probably not, since the story doesn’t tell us exactly how Servant #1 and Servant #2 in-

vested and doubled their master's money, and most of us aren't inclined to bury our money in the backyard.

Well, then, what does this parable have to say to us? Matthew 25 has three parables, all of them about "the end times" or "the coming of the kingdom." The first parable (which we heard last Sunday) is about ten bridesmaids, five of whom planned ahead and had enough oil for their lamps, five of whom were caught by surprise when the bridegroom showed up. When they rushed out to buy more oil at the eleventh hour, they were shut out of the celebration when they got back.

The third parable (which we will hear next Sunday) is about the nations appearing before the Son of Man sitting on his throne. The people are divided as sheep and goats and judged on what they did or didn't do for "one of the least of these": feeding the hungry, giving the thirsty something to drink, welcoming the stranger, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and the prisoners.

The parable of the talents is between these two stories about the coming of the kingdom. The master's departure, lengthy absence, and return "after a long time" certainly suggest Jesus' death and second coming. The master's distribution of his property (and the responsibility that went along with the bags of gold) certainly suggests Jesus giving his disciples and his followers their marching orders in the Great Commission (go and baptize and make disciples and teach). The master's apportionment

of his property to his servants, "to each according to his ability," sounds a lot like what the apostle Paul says about spiritual gifts: "Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. . . All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses." (1 Corinthians 12:4-7, 11)

The point of parable seems to be, "It matters what we do with what God has given us." Servant #3 said, "Master, I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground." How often do we let our fear get in the way of using what God has given us? How often are we afraid to do something with everything God has given us? How often do we make excuses for why we don't develop the gifts God gives us for service in his name and in his church and for his people?

We look around and think, "Well, those folks got five bags of gold. That's more than I've got!" We look around and think, "What difference could my little gift possibly make?" We look around and think, "It's too risky to use what I've been given. I'm afraid of what might happen." We look around and think, "Nobody's asked me to use what I've been given." We look around and think, "How does Almighty God, who can create something out of nothing, need little ole me? Who am I to think that anything I do matters to a God like that?"

What we do with what God gives each of us matters a lot. We are saved to service, given grace to respond in faith and in action, to use the grace-gifts of God. If we dig a

hole and hide what God has given us — because we're afraid of what might happen if we use what God has given us and calls us to do — that's not what God wants from us, no matter how smart we may think we are being, no matter how safe we play it.

Imagine going to heaven and standing by God as he lovingly shows you the calendar of his plan for your earthly life. It begins with the day you are born. You see footprints walking through each day of each week of your life. (No, this isn't exactly the familiar story of the footprints in the sand, but a variation.)

On many of those days, two sets of footprints appear. You ask, "Father, are those my footprints on the calendar every day, and is the second set of prints when you joined me?"

God answers, "No, child. The footprints that show up every day are mine. The second set of prints are when you decided to walk with me."

"Where were you going, Father?"

"To the place I had in mind for you, hoping you'd follow."

"But, Father, where are my footprints on all of those days?"

God says, "Sometimes you went back to look at old resentments and habits while I was still going forward, hoping you'd join me. Sometimes you walked away from the path and chose your own calendar instead. Other times your footprints can even be seen on another person's calendar, because you thought you liked their plan better. Sometimes you simply stopped because you wouldn't let go of something you couldn't take to the next day."

"Father, what are those golden treasure boxes on certain days?"

God says, "Those are blessings, child, that I had for you along the way. The boxes that are open are those you received. The boxes that are still closed were days you did not walk with me."

"But, Father, we ended up OK even if I didn't walk with you every day and even if I didn't open every blessing box. We ended up OK, didn't we?"

God holds you close and smiles and says, "Yes, child, we ended up OK. But, you see, OK was never what I had in mind for you."⁴

Let us pray: God, our Heavenly Father, you no longer call us servants but friends. There is so much you have entrusted to us, even the future of your kingdom of justice and love. Give us the grace to work out with you the growth of mercy and goodness in this world. Let us walk together the way to you, our living and loving God, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

NOTES

¹Lily Mae, "How to Hide Money in Your Yard," at www.ehow.com.

²Timestaff, “Why There’s No Such Thing as Risk-Free Investing,” October 10, 2012, at www.money.com.

³Walter Updegrave, “Where can I find no-risk investments?” April 27, 2018 at www.money.cnn.com.

⁴Adapted from “Following” found at www.sierravista.org/college/areyoufollowing.htm