

How to be Faithful

Message for Sunday, March 24, 2019
by Bruce Fraser

Scripture: Matthew 25:14-30

Children's Message:

I will use some silver dollars (yes, I saved a bunch!) to show the appropriate parts of the parable. I will emphasize "Well done, good and faithful servant!" That can be encouraging for a child.

I will assure them that God has indeed given them talents, and invite them to share what their talents are. I will encourage them to use their talents this week to bring honour to God.

Thanks to Philip Johnson for this idea, in *Celebrating the Seasons with Children*.

Message: "How to be faithful"

The Super Bowl is by far the most popular sporting event in North America. On average about 110 million people watch the big football game. (I don't say "in the world" because the final game in the 2018 World Cup of soccer was watched by 1.1 billion people, ten times as many as the Super Bowl.)

Advertisers pay big money for those eyeballs. A thirty second commercial in the Super Bowl game costs \$5.25 million. Tom Brady, the winning quarterback, is hailed as a hero, having led his team to win a record six Super Bowls.

Sports has attracted huge audiences, and made heroes, for centuries. In ancient Rome, up to 50,000 people would crowd into the Coliseum to watch athletic competitions, hunting wild animals and more. Sometimes they would even flood the floor of the stadium and hold mock naval battles! But for hundreds of years, the climax of the show was always the gladiator fights. The fighters were armed with their favourite weapon, and would fight to the death. The crowd hooted and hollered with every thrust of the sword, every drop of blood. Gladiators who won fight after fight became heroes, admired by everyone.

Until one day in 404 A.D. The historian Theodoret, who lived at that time, records what happened. Telemachus was a Christian monk who felt that God was calling him to visit Rome. In obedience he

went to the legendary city. On the day he arrived there was much excitement as the streets bustled with people going in one direction. He asked what the commotion was about, and learned there was a special show at the Coliseum. He went along to see what was happening.

The Roman army had just defeated an enemy, so there was a great victory parade. Then the entertainment began. As usual, the climax was the gladiator fight. When Telemachus realized what was happening, that people were going to die in the name of pleasure, he was sickened. He jumped to his feet and shouted, "In the name of Christ, stop!" Of course, with all the noise, no one heard him. He ran down the steps and jumped over the wall and landed inside the arena. He ran over to the gladiators and again shouted, "In the name of Christ, stop." The crowd, furious at someone interfering with their entertainment, threw at him stones, knives, and anything they could lay their hands on. One of the gladiators ran him through with his sword.

As Telemachus lay there, his blood staining the ground, the crowd grew silent. One person got up and left. Others soon followed, until the stadium was empty. The emperor gave an order that there be no more gladiator fights. That was the last one ever.

Telemachus followed the Jesus way of life, regardless where it led him. When he encountered something that was contrary to everything that Jesus stood for, he did what he could to stop it. He was faithful to the end.

In the Bible reading we're looking at today, Jesus commends two people for being faithful. Let's look at what it means to be faithful.

1) To be "faithful" means to do your job

Let's start with the third servant in Jesus' parable.

Matthew 25:18, 24-27, New International Version:
"The man who had received the one talent went off, dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money..."

"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.’”

That third servant didn’t cheat or steal or commit adultery or worship idols—none of those things that we often associate with being unfaithful. Furthermore he was completely honest. Yet the master didn’t consider him faithful, and instead called him worthless and lazy.

Let’s see what the other two did, for which they were considered faithful. I’ll just look at the first one, for the second is much the same.

Matthew 25:16, 21, New International Version:

“The man who had received the five talents went at once and put his money to work and gained five more...

“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!’”

What was required of these servants to be faithful? There are two possible answers I can see:

To use the money to make more. Earn a profit. Have something to show for your efforts.

Thus, if you venture out, but end up losing, then you have been unfaithful. In that case, it may be better to bury the money, and thus be sure of not losing. Maybe that’s what the third servant was thinking. I don’t think that’s the right answer.

To do the master’s work, diligently, to the best of your ability, with what has been given you. In this case, the most important thing is to act, instead of just thinking about acting. Taking action is what the third servant did *not* do. I think this is the right answer.

Some people have an inferiority complex, so that they think they’re not worth much, they can’t do much and so on. God just doesn’t accept that kind of excuse. When you complain about how poorly a house is built, you’re putting down the builder. When you complain how useless you are, you’re putting down *your* Maker. And God made you a masterpiece!

Part of this has to do with our society, and how it measures success, usually by making people compete for a rung on the ladder. When the world says you’re too old, or the wrong colour, or whatever, it says you’re not needed.

This is a story from the days before garbage trucks which compressed the garbage. Garbage was just tossed into an open-top freight truck. A lady fell off a second-story balcony and landed in an open-top garbage truck that was slowly moving past that apartment building. Half buried in the litter, she tried without success to get the driver’s attention. A foreign diplomat standing on the sidewalk saw it happen and commented indignantly, “Another example of how wasteful North-Americans are! That woman looks like she’s good for at least another 10 years.”

But as followers of Jesus we don’t live by the world’s values, as much as the world tries to squeeze us into its mold. Even though we live in this world, we belong to a different kingdom, with different rules.

God does not require from us something we cannot do. But God does require that we should use to the full the abilities which we do possess. People are not equal in talent. But they can be equal in effort. To be faithful means to do the work before you.

2) Fear is the enemy of faithfulness

You may be someone who realizes you have gifts from God. You may be fully dedicated to loving and serving God in your life. Yet you may still find yourself unable to get beyond the stage of thinking great thoughts, and to actually get going. It’s usually because of fear.

It is natural to feel fear—it’s our instinct for survival. I used to know a US marine who had served in the Vietnam war. He told me that if he

found someone in his group who was absolutely fearless, he would stay as far away from that person as possible. He didn't want to be close enough to catch any stray bullets when that person walked into an ambush.

So fear can be healthy! But when it paralyzes people, then it's unhealthy. Fear of failure, fear of rejection, fear of making mistakes, fear of looking silly... there's no end to people's fears that keep us from doing God's work.

The essential thing about fear is that it is self-centered. The essential thing about faith is that it is Christ-centered. When we live by faith, it doesn't mean fear is gone. It just means that something even more powerful has taken over as the driving force in your life.

3) Being faithful means that we need to use our talents

Matthew 25:28-29, New International Version:

"[The master said,] '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.'"

We see a rule of life which is universally true. If you have a talent and exercise it, you will gradually be able to do more with it. But, if you have a talent and fail to use it, you will inevitably lose that ability.

That is equally true of playing hockey or playing the piano, of building houses or building ideas. The only way to keep a gift is to use it in the service of God and in the service of your fellow humans.

4) A steward does what the master would do

Matthew 25:14, New International Version:

"[The Kingdom of God] will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted his property to them."

The master put the servants in charge, to manage his possessions. This is the meaning of stewardship: the master expects the servants to manage his affairs *as he himself would* if he were there.

Likewise, God has entrusted you with everything you have, even your life. We have been given the responsibility to look after these things. God expects us to use all this just the way God would. God has put an enormous amount of trust in you.

Just think: you're so special, and so talented that God decided to hire you for a special job. In fact, you're the only one qualified to do that job: to be you. So the next time you're filling out a resume, tell the employer that you've also worked for God! And may God say to you, "Well done, good and faithful servant!"

Next Steps:

- Pray: Thank God for your talents.
- Now think, "How can I use that ability to bring honour to God?" *
- Do it faithfully. Put aside fear, and follow God's calling.

* Tell the story of Becky Brodin. She is a nurse and works in a cardiac unit on the midnight shift. One night she only had 2 patients and both were sleeping. She settled in to stare at the monotonous blips on the monitors.

The other nurse on duty that night interrupted Becky's day-dreaming. "Can I talk to you about something?" Becky replied, "Sure, what is it?"

Her colleague cleared her throat and began. "I've noticed you bring your Bible to work every day, and I know you are a Christian, but..." She paused before continuing, "As a nurse you are dispensable. You have a lot of potential, but the discrepancy between what you could be and what you are is disappointing. Let me give you some advice whether you want it or not. If I were you I'd become indispensable. Maybe then someone will listen to your religion."

Becky was shocked, but not offended – she knew the other nurse was right. Becky had learned what she needed to do in order to get by, but she hadn't progressed any further. She was eager to share her faith, but didn't realize that her laziness at work spoke louder than her words.