As You Await the Master's Return...

Recognize your Master's generosity
Put your Master's gifts to work

It's called the ***Saddle Ridge Hoard*** (*hoard* here referring to a coin deposit). In 2013, a couple in northern California was walking their dog on their property, when they noticed a rust-covered metal can poking out of the ground. They pried it loose and carried it back to their house. What they found was a bunch of $20 gold coins from the late 1800s. The couple went back to the site, and discovered 7 more cannisters, totaling 1427 gold coins with a face value of $27,980. At the time they were discovered in 2013, they were valued at roughly 10 million dollars. *Time to dig out that old metal detector?* Someone back in the 1800s lost out big time! But this anonymous couple scored, big time!

Today, Jesus talks about a man who lost out because he buried a treasure in the ground. But he lost far more than money – he lost his soul. And in this story comes a clear instruction and encouragement to recognize our Master's generosity and put his gifts to work, as we await his return on the Last Day.

The magnitude of Jesus' words is amplified by the context in which he speaks them. Two days before Jesus would die on the cross, he and his disciples are gathered on a hillside at the edge of Jerusalem called the Mount of Olives. From there they had a good view of the temple with its impressive architecture and massive stone façade. With that in view, Jesus announces that one day it would all be destroyed. The disciples understandably associated such a catastrophic event with the end of the world. They asked Jesus, "When will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?" (Matthew 24:;3). From that question Jesus proceeds with a multi-lesson course about this time leading up to the Last Day. The lesson he gives today comers in the form of a parable about a Master who gives generous gifts to his servants, with the expectation that they put those gifts to work while he is away.

Matthew 25:14,15

This translation calls them "bags of gold." In Greek, the word is **τάλαντα**, from which we get the English word *talent*. A *talent* was originally a measurement of weight, but over time it also came to be a monetary value. The amount could vary, but in some cases, a single *talent* could equal 20 years wages. This Master was generous, putting into his servants' hands anywhere from 20 to 100 years wages. "Each according to his ability," Jesus says. God gives each servant the correct combination of abilities, opportunities, and responsibilities – that which he knows is best. The "man going on a journey" in this story is Jesus, who would soon be returning to heaven. While the work of salvation would be complete, work in his kingdom would continue until he comes back. To each disciple on the Mount of Olives that day, and to each disciple here today, the Master gives "bags of gold" to put to use as we await the Master's return.

But one of the servants in this parable didn't recognize the Master's generosity. This led him to squander the gift.

Matthew 25:18

As you view the giver, so you view the gift. This rings true for each of us to whom God entrusts gifts and abilities. *As you view the giver, so you view the gift*. This servant's view of the Master is evident by how he viewed the Master's gift. He buried it. It meant nothing to him, because the Master meant nothing to him.

In the story, Jesus could have tagged any of the three servants as the unfaithful one. But it's worth noting he chose the servant who had one talent. His unfaithfulness had nothing to do with the size of his gift relative to the others. It's that he remained unmoved by his Master's generosity. In terms of quantity, where would you place yourself in this parable? When it comes to your gifts and abilities, are you a five money bags servant? A two money bags servant? One bag? I'm guessing many of us would self-identify as a single talent holder. The reason I say this is that we are often quick to itemize all the things we *can't* do in God's kingdom (or *think* we can't do). *I can't sing like that. I could never talk openly to others about Jesus. I don't know the Bible well enough. My past makes me ineligible. The skeletons in my closet disqualify me* – convenient excuses that become low-hanging fruit for a lethargic faith. We don this mask of false humility to cover laziness, apathy, and selfishness. Well, as the parable makes clear, Christ will return. And when he does, there will be an accounting in accord with the gifts he has given – be they few or many, noticeable or subtle.

So why *did* the servant bury his Master's talent? Why didn't he put it to work? We hear his words in the matter, and then we hear the Master's words. First, the servant's explanation:

Matthew 25:24,25

"A hard man," the servant says of his Master – demanding; unyielding; "harvesting where you have not sown and gathering where you have not scattered seed." *Really? Where, unfaithful servant, did that "bag of gold" come from?* The servant forgot the true nature of his Master; he forgot the Master's generosity. We, who are so richly blessed, can be similarly forgetful. We can forget that everything we are and have – our time, our energy, our abilities, our material wealth and possessions – is *God's* wealth entrusted to us. And when we forget this, then we, too, see only a Master who is hard and demanding; a God who's out to get us – whose only interest is spotlighting our flaws; a God whose love and acceptance we must earn. Our guilty conscience fashions a God who takes diabolical delight in our hopeless attempts to please him.

If that's the only God you know, it's time to let yourself be introduced, or perhaps reintroduced, to the Master as he truly is. It's time to experience anew his generous mercy and forgiveness. The simple fact that we are his servants points to this mercy. Our place in his kingdom required his own lifeblood to be shed on the cross. This is how much God wanted to not only save us, but to give us meaningful work as servants in his kingdom. Let us recognize the Master's generosity, lest we lose out on the reward of grace he longs to give. May these words of the Master not be heard of us on the day of his return:

Matthew 25:26-30

As mentioned earlier, God gives us a variety of gifts to each of us. But one gift is common to every true member of his Church – the gift of faith in Jesus. We do not choose it; we do not accept it. Faith is "the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast" (Ephesians 2:8,9). That singular gift of faith gives our "bags of gold" supernatural power. It turns our talents and time and treasures into what Pacman becomes when he eats a power-pellet. Faith in Jesus empowers us to use our God-given gifts for demon-gobbling good, as we grow his kingdom of grace.

Matthew 25:16-17

We might naturally apply this parable only to those abilities we associate with service in the church. *Am I a musician? Can I teach God's Word? Can I serve on this or that committee? Can I take care of children? Can I organize ministry events? Can I give large quantities of money?* Fixating only on what we quote-unquote *do for the church* often leads to unintended shaming – shaming of self and maybe one another. But that is not what our Lord had in mind with this parable. While serving in ways that enable gospel ministry is an important use of our God-given gifts, we mustn't limit what our Savior says to a church signup sheet.

Jesus wants us to apply this parable wholistically. Don't search for your talents among the unique and exceptional. Your talents are held within hands that write checks for utility bills as much as for church offerings, all to the glory of God; your gifts are found in eyes that absorb literature and information that expands the mind with creative thought and ideas; feet that carry you to errands that provide daily needs; a mouth that can smile; ears willing to listen; legs that can leap and run, arms that can throw, shoot, catch, and dunk…or maybe just reach down to pick up a piece of trash – regardless if it's in a church parking lot or public sidewalk; a mind and mouth that can read the Bible and pray out loud at your dinner table or your child's bedroom. Friends, God has equipped you with just the right quantity and category of gifts and talents for every context of life. And as you put your Master's gifts to work, you can look forward to an eternal return of grace – with compound interest.

Matthew 25:19-23

Can't you hear the joyful satisfaction in the servants' words when the Master returns? They know who he is. They have experienced his heart of love; his limitless forgiveness; his generosity. So have we. As we await the Master's return, let's put his gifts to work. For then we can lay before him the fruits of our privileged service, and be welcomed with those words, "Well done, good and faithful servant!...Come and share your Master's happiness!"

Amen.