

### Faithful or Fearful?

We all like compliments, right? We all like to be affirmed. If you could choose any two adjectives to be used as compliments of you, what would they be? Let me give you an example (or rather two): “strong” and “intelligent.” Those are both pretty complimentary adjectives, wouldn’t you agree? But which two adjectives would you most like others to use in reference to you? I’m going to give you a few seconds or so to write two down.

I’ve often joked, although it really is no joke, that I have spent my whole life trying simply to be “good.” “Tommy, you’re a good boy.” “Tom, you’re a good musician.” “You’re a good pastor.” That would be enough. Any second adjective would merely be extra icing on the cake.

Okay, we all like compliments, but no one likes criticism. What two adjectives would you least want others to use of you? Here would be two examples: “weak,” and “stupid.” What two words would you least want others to use of you? I’ll give you a few seconds.

In today’s parable, Jesus gives us three slaves, and one master. The master is pretty much a neutral character at first. All we really know about him is that he has slaves, and therefore must be a person of some wealth and status. Also, he apparently trusts his slaves, at least enough to “entrust” some of his property or wealth to them.

To one he gives five talents, to another two, and to the third he gives one. A talent is a huge sum of money. One talent represented 20 years’ worth of wages for a day laborer. So while five talents is a crazy amount of money, even one talent is more than generous. All we are told by way of explanation for the different sizes of their gifts is that he gave each “according to his ability.” Ability to do what, we don’t know. But what’s most important, and what we mustn’t lose sight of, is that he trusted all three of them, and gave all three a huge sum of his own money.

The first slave seemed to know right away what to do with that money. You invest it; you put it to use. Which he did by “trading” with it. Bringing to our minds the stock market. He clearly knew what he was doing, and was able to exactly double his money. Or rather, his master’s money. Instead of having five talents, he now has ten. Like I said, a crazy amount of money.

The second servant also clearly knew what to do with the money given him. And “in the same way,” (whether by similarly “trading” with it or by some other successful means), he doubled his master’s money. Two talents became four. Again, a crazy amount of money.

But the third slave is different. He doesn’t put his master’s money to use. Instead, he puts it in a hole. A hole he dug himself. He “hid his master’s money.” Why would he do that? All we can guess at this point in the parable is that he is either being “careful,” or he’s “fearful.” Two possible adjectives to explain or describe this third slave. And you know, we can start to relate to this third slave, can’t we? He’s a little bit like us.

Jesus says that “after a long time” (five years? Ten? How about two thousand?) the master came back to “settle” accounts with them. Which sounds like pretty generic business language. He simply wanted his money back. But he was probably also curious to see what or

how well his slaves had done with it. The first one, who had received the five talents, again seems matter-of-fact if not downright confident. “Here you go. I doubled it, made five more talents.”

Well, his master is effusive with his praise. “Well done!” he begins. Those would nice words to hear, wouldn’t they? “Well done, [name].” “Well done, [name].” It doesn’t really matter who’s saying it, whether your teacher, your coach, your pastor, your parishioner; it just feels good.

And then after the master says “Well done,” he uses two adjectives to describe the servant: “good,” and “trustworthy.” Wow. (I already mentioned that “good” is one of the ones I would most like to hear.) And on top of that, to be called trustworthy?! Pure icing on the cake! Those two adjectives would be enough for most of us to last a lifetime.

Next comes the second slave, the one who received the two talents. And it’s exactly the same as with the first, right?—verses 22-23 are exactly the same as verses 20-21. The same matter-of-fact confidence on the part of the slave, the same effusive praise on the part of the master. It apparently didn’t matter whether the slave had earned his master five extra talents, or just two.

And then to both of them, after the two compliments, the master says this: “enter into the joy of your master.” Wow! I woulda thought I’d died and gone to heaven. Which may be exactly what Jesus has in mind.

And finally comes the third slave, the one we can most relate to. Listen to how different he is from the first two. “Master, I knew you were a harsh man,” he says to him. “reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed.” The third slave is essentially calling his master greedy, exploitative, even abusive. What a contrast in the relationship between the first two slaves and their master, and the third. Something had gone horribly wrong in their relationship

And the slave admits it: “I was afraid.” (Afraid of what, he doesn’t say, but again, we can relate to him, right?) “I was afraid, but . . . here is the money you gave me. Every cent.”

Doesn’t your heart go out to him? Don’t you even kind of admire him? Both because he was honest enough to admit he was afraid, AND because he was still able to give the master back every last cent. Impressive!

But suddenly, the master sounds like a completely different person. “You wicked and lazy slave!” Did you hear those two adjectives? (Were either of those on your list?) “Wicked”—it doesn’t get any worse than that. And “lazy”—he may as well have said “you are completely worthless.” Which in fact he says later, in verse 30.

Then the master berates him, completely tears him down. “You should have at least put the money I loaned you in the bank, where it would have earned some interest. Take his measly money, and give it to the first slave. And then take him as far away from me as you can. I never want to see him again.” Who is this master? Harsh and greedy, I guess!

So what do we do with this parable? Because I think we can agree it’s not a very nice one. What is the “one point” it is trying to make (which in my sermon last week I said is what parables typically have—one point)? I’d like to suggest two.

First (and we might think this the bad news), we are in certain ways like all three of those slaves. In subservience to a life we mostly don’t control. (Don’t you feel like that sometimes?) It’s like the psalmist said this morning, in the Call to Worship. In face of the all-powerful God, we are mere mortals, he says in Part 1. Destined to return to dust. We are like grass that flourishes in the morning, but in the evening fades and withers. The days of our lives are

“seventy years, or perhaps eighty, if we are strong; even then their span is only toil and trouble.” In other words, basically we're born, we die, and in between all we do is toil. Don't we all feel that way sometimes, at least on the bad days?

But second (and we can call this the good news), even amidst that gloomy assessment, we have been entrusted with the master's property. Let me say that again: we have been entrusted with the master's property. So let me ask you: what “property” has the master entrusted you with? What gifts, talents, blessings?

It's completely up to us what we do with that gift, whether we put it to work, or merely hide it in a hole. Which are you doing?

It's also completely up to us how we perceive the master. Whether we can see his generosity and feel his trust. Or whether we cling to our own distorted view that he is niggardly, harsh, self-serving. It's completely up to us to choose whether to enter into the wonderful, heavenly joy of the master, or whether to remain outside, in darkness, where there can only be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Finally, it's completely up to us to choose our own adjectives. Or let me put that differently—it's up to us whether we gratefully accept the adjectives that God the Master has already chosen for us, or whether we stubbornly cling to those we keep choosing for ourselves. Will we choose and live by such adjectives as “fearful” and “wicked?” Or will we choose such adjectives as “faithful” and “good?” When you think about it, the last two are precisely what God has created us and destined us to be!

Amen.