



Catalog No. 935

Luke 19:11-27

Eleventh Message

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February 13, 1994

INVESTING IN THE RETURN

SERIES: PARABLES OF THE KINGDOM

When I was a boy growing up in Nebraska and Iowa, the Athletics baseball team was based in Kansas City, not in Oakland as it is today. On a couple of occasions we drove down to Kansas City to watch the New York Yankees play the Kansas City Athletics. I loved the Yankees. They were my favorite team. Mickey Mantle was my hero. If I still had all my Mickey Mantle baseball cards and those of the other Yankee greats, I would be a rich man today. One time when we went to a game, I was hoping to get Mantle's autograph so we arrived at the ball park early. An usher told me to stand with him by a certain gate. When he opened the gate, he said, I would be in right in Mantle's path to the field. I took my place by the gate. Autograph seekers lined both sides of the walkway, but I had the best spot.

At last the Yankee players began to come out of the locker room. One by one they walked by me: Tony Kubek, Bobby Richardson, Whitey Ford, Yogi Berra, Elston Howard, Cletus Boyer, Enos Slaughter. I was in heaven. My mother tried to get me to ask for their autographs, but I was afraid someone would be signing my book when Mantle came out and I would miss him. So I just stood there, watching. Finally, Mickey Mantle came down the pathway and I asked him for his autograph. He looked down at me, put his hand on my shoulder, and said, "Not right now, partner." I didn't get Mickey Mantle's autograph. Worse still, I was so focused on getting just his signature that I ended up getting no one's. I was afraid to risk while I waited for my hero to arrive.

The Bible says there is Someone coming who will consummate all of history as we know it. But this wondrous, future event presents many Christians with a dilemma. We can be so anxious for the future, and so afraid of risking, that we lose sight of the present. What should we be doing while we are waiting for Christ's return? The parable of Jesus to which we come today says that we need to learn the skill of waiting.

Over the past 18 months, these studies in Jesus' parables from the gospel of Luke have brought home to me new and refreshing insights into the truth. I hope they have done the same for you. We have seen that the deep, insightful truths of the parables come home to us in an indirect way. At first glance, many of these stories can be puzzling. They need our careful consideration. But these words of Jesus have a way of getting by our defenses and penetrating our heart.

It is fitting that our final study brings us to the last parable of Jesus from the Travel Narrative, which is found in chapters 9–19 of Luke. Our text today is 19:11-27.

And while they were listening to these things, He went on to tell a parable, because He was near Jerusalem, and they supposed that the kingdom of God was going to appear immediately. He said therefore, "A certain nobleman went to a distant country to receive a kingdom for himself, and then return. And he called ten of his slaves, and gave them ten minas, and said to them, 'Do business with this until I come back.' But his citizens hated him, and sent a delegation after him, saying, 'We do not want

this man to reign over us.' And it came about that when he returned, after receiving the kingdom, he ordered that these slaves, to whom he had given the money, be called to him in order that he might know what business they had done. And the first appeared, saying, 'Master, your mina has made ten minas more.' And he said to him, 'Well done, good slave, because you have been faithful in a very little thing, be in authority over ten cities.' And the second came, saying, 'Your mina, master, has made five minas.' And he said to him also, 'And you are to be over five cities.' And another came, saying, 'Master, behold your mina, which I kept put away in a handkerchief; for I was afraid of you, because you are an exacting man; you take up what you did not lay down, and reap what you did not sow.' He said to him, 'By your own words I will judge you, you worthless slave. Did you know that I am an exacting man, taking up what I did not lay down, and reaping what I did not sow? 'Then why did you not put the money in the bank, and having come, I would have collected it with interest?' And he said to the bystanders, 'Take the mina away from him, and give it to the one who has the ten minas.' And they said to him, 'Master, he has ten minas already.' I tell you, that to everyone who has shall more be given, but from the one who does not have, even what he does have shall be taken away. But these enemies of mine, who did not want me to reign over them, bring them here and slay them in my presence.' (Luke 19:11-27 NASB)

As has been our pattern throughout these studies, I will begin by making some observations on the text; and then I will highlight some spiritual principles arising from it.

First, the context. The parable is surrounded with a sense of purpose. Jesus and the disciples are approaching Jerusalem, having just come through Jericho. In the Old Testament, Joshua ("Jesus") laid Jericho bare. Then, Jesus saved Bartimaeus, and also Zaccheus. This might remind us of God saving Rahab the harlot. The disciples imagine that the kingdom is coming soon ("they supposed that the kingdom of God was going to appear immediately"). But Jesus informs them that they must go on to Jerusalem. The account burns with anticipation and a sense of urgency. Something is about to happen.

The next event, the Triumphal Entry, exposes the false expectations of the people. Everyone was certain this was the end. But Jesus warned the disciples that they had wrong expectations. Obviously, the direct approach was not working. His purpose in declaring the parable was to change their view of the end times. Further, it would help protect them from cynicism later when others were abandoning their commitment to him. The parable, therefore, is an essential element in the disciples' recovery. If we truly understand its context, then the suggestion that the story is about the wise use of money will seem totally unfounded. This will become even more obvious as we go along.

The story opens with the account of a nobleman traveling to a distant country to receive a kingdom for himself. This would not seem odd to Jesus' listeners. It would be typical for a nobleman who was to inherit a kingship to leave and go to Rome to receive authority. In fact, this very thing had just taken place. In Palestine, on the death of Herod the Great, his son, Archelaus, went to Rome to inherit the kingship.

Before departing, the nobleman calls ten of his slaves and gives them each one mina. (In Matthew's gospel, each slave receives a different amount, but here in Luke, they all receive the same.) A mina was worth about 100 denarii, while a denarius was the equivalent of a day's pay. This was a significant sum—more than three month's wages. The king tells the slaves to do business with what they had been given until his return. This would be accomplished by buying and selling in the marketplace. There were no stock exchanges then and no venture capital opportunities. The slaves would deal in commodities, buying and selling livestock and goods. The principle was the same then as it is today: buy low, sell high.

But the citizens hate the king. They do not want him in authority over them. They even send a delegation after him to dissuade him from returning. Historically, this occurred when Archelaus and his brother Antipas went to Rome to dispute the kingship. Not wanting Archelaus as king, the Jews sent a delegation to Rome to plead for autonomy.

Following Holy Week, the parable would be easy to interpret. Obviously, the nobleman is Jesus. After his death, resurrection, and ascension, he went to a "far country." He received kingly power when he sat down at the right hand of God; and he promised to return in the second coming. These events are pictured with the Triumphal Entry, the trial, and the crucifixion of Jesus. The citizens hate the king (the Jews did not want Jesus to be king over them). The world hates Jesus. That will never change. We do not want God; it is God who wants us.

True to his word, the king returns. He immediately calls the slaves and asks for an accounting of what they had been given. The first slave made 10 minas with his one mina, an increase of 1000%. He is praised and put in authority over ten cities. Notice that it is not his ability to make money, but his faithfulness that is praised. This will be important later on.

The second slave made five minas. We are reminded of the story of the sower whose labor had varying results. This slave is put in charge of five cities.

But the third slave hid his coin in a handkerchief. He feared his master's response if he failed to use it properly. He wasn't going to risk anything, so he plays it safe. His excuse for not doing business is his estimation of his master's character. He tells the master that he is exacting, harsh and severe; that he takes up what he does not lay down and reaps what he does not sow. In essence, he is calling his master a crook.

The king does not dispute the slave's estimation of his character. He simply judges him by his own words. The slave did not even live up to his own understanding of the king's character. If he truly thought the king was an exacting man, then he would at least have put the money in the bank and made interest. (There were banks in those days and interest would vary according to the state of the economy, just like today.) The result of the slave's action is that he loses what was given to him. His mina is taken away from him and given to the one who had ten. The principle is given: "I tell you, that

to everyone who has shall more be given, but from the one who does not have, even what he does have shall be taken away." If you don't use it, you lose it.

In the final verse, a severe judgment is exacted on the citizens. They receive the death sentence. "The outrage of law violated is nothing compared to the white-hot fury of grace spurned" (Robert Capon).

This brings us now to the spiritual principles of this parable. I want to highlight four. First: *We are waiting for the certain return of the King.*

A famous Hollywood actor said in one of his movies, "I'll be back." In other words, a sequel could be anticipated. How much more should we anticipate the return of Jesus?

Jesus has already come to earth and left. And he promised that he was coming back. Today we are waiting for his second coming, what the Bible calls the *parousia*. Meanwhile, we must live in this time of "already, but not yet." Christ has come, but the kingdom has not been consummated. So we are living, as it were, in a state of tension. We do not have control. We feel we are at risk. We need to acquire the skill of waiting. A feature of sin is despair. Delay makes us want to quit. Either we suffer from a syndrome of reduced expectations or we keep adding things because we desperately need to feel secure. We grow impatient. We don't want to wait for anything. In this age of instant gratification we want results right now. Anything short of this is unacceptable.

One of the things that will help us to wait skillfully is banking on Christ's certain return. The third slave had a problem with this. He wasn't sure he should or could risk. Perhaps he thought the delegation would influence the final decision. As Christians, however, we can be utterly confident of Christ's return. We don't need to worry about a time and place. The fact of his coming is enough.

The Jews, of course, lived in constant awareness of the coming of the kingdom of God, even though they had it all wrong. Many of the great poets, Byron, Keats, Shelley, Tennyson, have written of this future event. The familiar "Battle Hymn of the Republic" centers on this theme. So does Tolkien's book *The Return of the King*, and Lewis' *The Last Battle*. The entire Old Testament anticipates the first coming of Jesus, while the New Testament anticipates his second coming.

According to the psalmist the wicked say: "there is no God." The wicked claim that they can do whatever they want because "God has forgotten; He has hidden His face; He will never see it." But they are wrong. The world has sent a delegation saying, "We do not want Jesus to reign over us." But they are wasting their time. We can bank on his return.

Our second principle is this: *While we wait for Christ's return we have something to do.*

In the story, the servants are required to act upon what they have been given. The first and second servants follow their instructions and receive approval; the third servant does nothing and is judged.

Jesus has left for a distant country. He has given us something (not money; why would he be concerned about our making money before he came back?) and he requires us to do business with it. We have been given the gift of eternal life. We have been given the Holy Spirit and spiritual gifts. Jesus is telling us to do business with these until he returns.

We accomplish this, of course, by going out into the marketplace and reproducing what has been given to us. It is important to note that Jesus is talking about the daily, the routine, the ordinary. The slaves were not told to go away to a foreign land or come up with a great new invention. They were to go to the marketplace. Jesus doesn't ask us to dream up some new scheme for evangelism, travel to some out of the way place, or take 14 years of Bible classes. While these things are good in themselves, they are not the focal point of the parable.

Jesus is saying that while we are waiting for his return we are to reproduce in the midst of the ordinary and daily events of life what has been given to us. This means we are to love people and share the gospel with them. Think of the many people you meet in the course of your life. Think about the many opportunities you have in the marketplace to trade with the life that God has given to you. If we know how to wait, these opportunities will turn golden.

When my wife and I bought our first house, I felt that we would not be living there very long. As a result, I was tempted to not do much with the house. I would wait until we bought our dream house, then I would work hard, and risk my time and energy to make it what I wanted. This is how some of us are tempted to act while we are waiting for Jesus to return. But while we are waiting for marriage, for the right job, for things to fall into place, the temptation is to do nothing. We are so preoccupied with the final destination, or so afraid of risking, that we do not enter into the present. We need a skill of waiting that allows us to engage our faith in enterprises that might be risky.

Notice here the quality that is praised by the king. It is not the amount of money that was made, but rather the faithfulness of the slaves, the risk they were willing to take. The parable calls us to trust the Lord and his grace. The results really don't depend on us. The quantity of results is nothing; the quality of faith is everything. We never need be concerned with how much we are doing for God. Life is not a contest to see who can win the most souls. What is important is being faithful to the opportunities that God gives us. We are called to be faithful in little things, to risk the life we have been given rather than hide it in a handkerchief. The skill of waiting is the skill of being faithful to the work the Lord gives to each one of us.

Our model for this is the disciples, the ones whom Jesus taught. Following his death they hid out in the upper room because they were afraid of the Jews. Peter even denied the Lord three times. Just before the ascension they were still confused about the coming of the kingdom of God. They even asked the resurrected Lord, "Is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?" Jesus responded: "It is not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority; but you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth." Finally, when the Spirit came on the day of Pentecost, the disciples began risking with incredible boldness. They weren't making money; they were telling people about the kingdom of God. They had learned the skill of waiting, of risking, of doing business with what God had given them.

On a snowy Sunday morning in 1849, in Colchester, England, only about twelve or fifteen people attended church services in a little Primitive Methodist Chapel. The minister was not among them; he was snowed in. So one of the small group, a thin-looking man, went up into the pulpit to preach. A fifteen-year-old boy was sitting

under the balcony that morning. The words of the speaker touched his heart. The boy, Charles H. Spurgeon, went on to become one of the greatest preachers ever. When he died, forty-three years later, he had preached to well over a million people. It is estimated that he led hundreds of thousands of people to Jesus Christ. The man who preached that morning was being faithful to risk what had been given him.

Now our third principle: *The obstacle to faithful obedience is the fear of risking identity with the King.*

We have to ask why didn't the third slave risk anything? Why didn't he put the mina in the bank where there would be no risk? It was because he feared the king, he said. I think that was a cover-up. His problem was that he was afraid of being identified with the king. If he had gone to the marketplace or to the bank, the whole village would have known that he was identifying himself with the king. It was a significant amount of money; people would know that it belonged to the nobleman. The first and second slaves were willing to declare their loyalty to the king. They anticipated that their master would return, in contrast to the citizens who hated him and didn't want him to return. The third slave was not confident in his return. He was trying to hedge his bets. If he identified with the king, then he would be hated as well. If the king did not return, he wanted to be in a position to find favor with the citizens.

Jesus wants us to trade with the life he has given us. This is risky and dangerous. If we go into the marketplace and make ourselves known, we will be identified with him. The world hates Jesus, and it will hate us. If we let someone know about our faith, we might not be liked, so we tend to hide the gift in a safe place. We try to deal with God on the basis of what we think he is like rather than on the basis of what we trust him to be in Jesus. We are afraid to risk. But if we are to have the skill of waiting for his return, we must be willing to identify with Christ and risk the world's rejection.

This can be a major obstacle. When I was a new Christian I was working as an engineer. I went to church and attended a Bible study. But my colleagues were unaware that I was a Christian. I didn't want to be identified with Christ for two reasons. I didn't want to risk being hated, and I wanted to leave open my options for sinning. I was hiding in a handkerchief what the Lord had given me. Some time later I began teaching a Bible study once a week. But the people who attended did not work with me. It was easy having a Bible Study with people I didn't know. Finally, after several years, I risked being identified with Jesus. By then, almost everyone I worked with knew I was a Christian, and the Bible studies included people who knew me. I found that it wasn't as bad as I thought it might. Things really got exciting after this. One day I found a woman sitting in my office reading my notes for a wedding service. She liked what she was reading and she asked me where I attended church. From then on I went to work with a different attitude. The name of Jesus was at stake. Everyone was watching. I couldn't just do as I pleased. I was going into the marketplace to do business.

God's desire is that we do business with the life we have been given; to trade with it; to take it into the marketplace and reproduce it. The obstacle to this kind of faithful obedience is the fear of risking identity with the King.

Finally, the fourth principle: *The judgment or the reward that we receive in the future is dependent on the choice we make now.*

The parable does not have a pleasant ending. The third slave and the citizens are judged. The slave's mina is taken from him and given

to the one who already had ten; and the citizens are summoned and slain. You might be wondering whether the slave was slain as well. Perhaps he was allowed to live. The question misses the point. What it is asking is, if you don't do anything, or if you do just the minimum, will you still be saved and enter heaven? The point is to not be like the third slave.

The first two slaves are rewarded by being given increased opportunities and greater responsibility. The implication is that there will be things to do in heaven.

Faith, a trust in Christ that allows us to risk in the face of our fears, is the issue at stake. The thing that is examined at the judgment is faith. Good deeds are not the issue. The only thing that will deprive us of a favorable judgment is our unfaith in the life that God has given us. Robert Capon comments: "The precise form that the condemned servant's unfaith took was the hiding of the coin in a napkin. What that says to me is that if we keep Jesus only as a memento—or better said, if we keep the sacramentalities by which he disclosed the mystery only as events to be remembered or ideas and doctrines to be kept intact—we put ourselves out of the reach of his reconciliation."

It is important to note that there are no options available when the king returns; there are no second chances. When Jesus returns, reward and judgment have already been decided. Then it will be too late to decide whom you want to identify with. What happens at that point will depend on the choices we are making now. And failing to make a choice is essentially to choose not to believe in Jesus. To not make a choice is the wrong choice. Our life right now, today, reflects the choice we have made. We are either hiding the gift or we are in the marketplace doing business with it, being faithful to whatever the Lord has given us to do. "The only sadness is not to be a saint" (Charles Peguey).

I don't like to risk. I'm not a betting man. Years ago, I lost five dollars on the slot machines and didn't talk to my wife all day because I was so mad at wasting my money. This parable tells us that the return of Jesus is a sure thing. And so I have risked everything I have and everything I am by identifying with him. The parable teaches us the skill of waiting, what it is to be faithful, to risk, to do business, to be farsighted, and to invest in the return of the King. May we look forward to that day when he says to us, "Well done, good slave, because you have been faithful in a very little thing."

In this series of messages on the parables of Jesus, I am greatly indebted to Eugene Peterson for his wonderful class which I took at Regent College in Vancouver, and to the insightful work of Kenneth Bailey in his two books, *Poet and Peasant* and *Through Peasant Eyes*.

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