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Title: The Stories Jesus Told: The Bags of Gold

Scripture: Matthew 25:14-30

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Last weekend, we began a series called *The Stories Jesus Told*, and we're looking at some of Jesus' stories. We looked at a group of them about eight years ago, and last week we started with some of the stories in Matthew 25. There are three of them told in success, and today we're looking at the second story in Matthew 25, which is found in verses 14 through 30.

I'm going to say something I don't normally say. So, if you're newer here, just know this isn't something I say all the time. But last week, we talked about mental maps that we have for heaven. And to really understand this story, we need to understand some of what we talked about last week.

And so, at some level, I want to encourage you to go back if you didn't hear it last week and listen to it. It will help you understand it. What we talked about was how the parable starts with him saying what the kingdom of heaven is like, and how if you have a mental map of what the kingdom of heaven is like, it will impact how you read the parable.

And here, when it says again, it is the kingdom of heaven, he's talking about how you understand the kingdom of heaven in this story. And the reason this matters is because if your perception of heaven is all future, not present and future, then your idea of how you read this story will be impacted by that. But if you see the kingdom of heaven as being both present and future, that will impact how you read this story. It can lead to some ways of thinking that I think can be unhelpful if it's not understood in this context.

One pastor and author was once asked in what ways he'd been complicit in perpetuating a system of works righteousness. This is how he responded. He said, "I'm so embarrassed by many of the sermons I preached early on. I wish I could go back and apologize to all the people who heard them. My primary concern at the time was to get people to do more, to try harder, and to change. The end result was stunted spiritual growth for our people because I was causing them to fix their eyes on themselves rather than on Christ. Preoccupation with our performance over Christ's performance for us, actually hinders spiritual growth because it makes us increasingly self-centered and morbidly introspective. It's the exact opposite of what the Bible describes and what it means to be sanctified. Sanctification is forgetting yourself."

He quotes another author. He says, "The good seed cannot flourish when it's constantly dug up for the purpose of examining its growth." And then he continues. "In those early days, I was treating the Bible as if it were a heaven-sent self-help manual. The fact is, unless we go to the Bible and see Jesus and his work for us, even our devout Bible reading can become fuel for our own self-improvement plans, the place we go for help, where we need to conquer today's challenges or take control of our lives. What I've learned since those days is that the Bible is not a record of the blessed good, but rather the blessed bad. The Bible is not a witness to the best people making it up to God. It's a witness of God making it down to the worst people. The Bible is one long story of God meeting our rebellion with His rescue, our

sin with His salvation, our failure with His favor, and our guilt with His grace, and our badness with his goodness.”

The reason I read this, just as we begin considering this story, is because when you read this story without the context of what the Bible teaches about the kingdom of heaven and a broader understanding, especially if your mental map of heaven is future only, what you could do is read this story to say you better try harder, do more, because those who do well will one day be commended, and those who don't will one day be thrown into the outer darkness.

Now, to be fair, this text does say that, and there is an element of the future, and there is an element of this kind of thinking in this text. But again, to understand it fully, then we need to understand that heaven, the kingdom of heaven is present and future at the same time. For God, the time continuum that we like to think about is a different category.

Here's what he teaches just in this text. Two simple statements. First, is that people of faith have been entrusted with much. This is in verses 14 through 18. It's the idea of the different bags of gold. So, one person's given five, one person's given two, and one person's given one. The old King James uses the phrase talent. Maybe you've heard this story taught as The Parable of the Talents. A talent was basically something that was given to people as a sum of money, and it was worth about 20 years of a person's working wage. So, think of your income, multiply it by 20. And that is roughly what each bag of gold represents here. The NIV uses The Bag of Gold as a more modern way to put it, and in some ways, it avoids some of the confusion about whether this is about our earthly talents. It just says the master has gone on a journey and given resources to people he's entrusted.

Now notice that they're given different resources. In Luke 19, there's a story where people are given the same resources, but here they're given different resources. And the significance of this is that we don't all have equal opportunity spiritually or in life. Sometimes in our day, people want to talk about us having equal outcomes. But in the Bible, we're given different opportunities, and we're responsible for the outcome from what it is that we've been given. That's what we're responsible for.

Maybe you've seen this exercise where people have a race that they're going to run and that they're all at the starting line. And then before it starts, they start asking questions and they say, take a step forward if. And they'll say, take a step forward if you grew up in a home with two parents. Take a step backward if you didn't have this kind of education or this kind of opportunity. And they differentiated people by this. And their point is generally to say that we all start somewhere different, and it makes a difference in the outcome that we can expect. Often that's used in our modern world to say let's try to make the opportunity equal.

And to a certain extent that can be a really good thing. But at the same time, what Jesus is doing is He's just simply saying the truth of the matter is we all have different opportunities. Some of us grew up around faith in a strong church home. Some of us grew up with parents who invested in us and modeled what it is to have faith. Some of us had a great church experience. Some of us had less of those things. And the point here is, Jesus is saying I'm asking you to be responsible for what I have given you.

Now, I want to just note one other thing here in the way the NIV translates this. It says that the servants were given bags of gold in the original language. The word that's used here is the Greek word "doulos," and it means slave more or less. And the reason that I point this out is because I think rightly, the NIV has translated it as servant because there's so much baggage for Americans with the word slavery, as there should be, because that is a negative thing in our history.

But in the Bible, the idea of a slave was one who belonged to another and completely arranged their lives around the bidding of another. In other words, to be the slave of the master was to say, I don't own my own life. I'm not in charge of me, and I'm here to do your bidding. And so, Jesus' story is simple. To his slaves, he gave incredible resources. I mean, 5 times 20, that's 100 years of income. Your standard income. I mean, that's just a lot. And that's his point. He gave a lot.

Then his second point is basically this. Each person is accountable for all that they've been given. This is the whole point of verses 21, 23, 26 and 28. To the one who had five and had earned five more. Verse 21, "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!'" Verse 23, after the one with two, comes and says, I've earned two more. He says this exact same phraseology. "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!'"

Then the person who had the one bag of gold comes. He had taken it out, dug a hole, and he put it in the ground. Jesus' response is different. Here's the response. Verse 26, "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.'" He says, in essence, there are two different ways that people respond. One is good and faithful he says, slave, because you took what I gave you, and you used it well. Enter the master's happiness. Then there's the one who buries it. Notice the words that are used, wicked and lazy. Then at the end in verse 30, worthless. He says these are the options for how you respond to what's been given to you.

Now, in verse 30, he says, as a wasteful servant or a useless servant, you're going to be assigned a place within the outer darkness where there's weeping and gnashing of teeth. And weeping and gnashing of teeth is often a phrase that's a euphemism for eternal suffering. And so, if you read this parable simply as a future parable, not as both present and future for the kingdom of heaven, you would say, therefore, what we do determines our eternity.

But here's why we need to see it as present and future, because when we do, what happens is we begin to see how Scripture speaks about our deeds. So, let me just give you a couple of other verses that speak to how we do things. Here is Ephesians chapter 2, verse 10, which comes right after Ephesians 2, verses 8 and 9. Write that one down. The reason that's important is because what Ephesians 2:8-9 say very clearly is that it's by grace that we've been saved through faith, not from ourselves. It's a gift of God, not by works, so that no one can boast. In other words, it's Christ's resumé, not our resumé. It's not about our words. It's

not about what we do. Verse 10, "For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do."

So, what role do works play? They are the evidence of God's work in us, is what that says. First Corinthians chapter 3, verse 15, talking about the work that people do, and the evaluation that they'll receive in the future. It says this, "If it is burned up, the builder will suffer loss but yet will be saved—even though only as one escaping through the flames." So, biblically speaking, it is possible to not live a perfect life, to not have it be your works, and still end up being evaluated. And when you put this together with the kingdom is now and the kingdom is future, what happens is you can begin to see that Jesus is using this to say that our works are actually evidence of what's real. So, here's the question, and that is, what's real in your life?

I don't know if any of you have a Spotify account, but if you do, I like my Spotify account. But one of the things that is a little weird about it is how well it seems to pick out music for me. Does anybody else have this experience? If you have one, it has this thing called new music release radar. And what it'll do is, based on what you've listened to in the past, it will predict what you like in the present. And when you listen to it, you will probably go, oh, how did they know I like that? Or who is listening to my Spotify? But it tells you what is true for what you've liked and what it is. It says that you are as a music fan.

And I believe what Jesus is doing here is he's saying your works are telling you what it is that you actually value. Are you a person who says my calendar reflects my priorities, or the priorities of the master that I have, the God of the universe? Do my finances reflect my priorities or the priorities of my master, the master who's the creator of the universe? Do I tip God, or do I tithe? Is my reputation leveraged only for my own well-being, or is it leveraged for my master? Do I use my reputation in school and with my friends and in my neighborhood as somebody who's a follower of the God of the universe? Or do I keep that kind of secret and hidden in a hole in the ground, figuratively speaking? Do you see what he's saying?

Now, you may hear this today and say, well, this feels kind of like guilt and pressure, like I better work hard so I can hear the words, well done, good and faithful servant. And I understand how you could hear it this way. And again, it's not without merit that there is judgment because the master comes back to settle accounts. But sometimes the way that this is heard is a little bit like somebody who says, well, what I need to do is be radical in my life for Jesus. And maybe you've heard this kind of presentation. It's usually done with a real emotive kind of presentation. You know, somebody who will get real emotive and be like, there are people dying. How dare you go out to eat and use the money that you could have used to help somebody be saved. And you walk away going, oh, my goodness. I can't believe I went out to eat. I can't believe that I bought myself something. I mean, you have this thing where you say, maybe I could have, and it's this sense of pressure and guilt.

But I think when you understand this text, it's actually not calling you to be radical or extraordinary. And I'm not saying that there's not a time to consider what radical devotion to Jesus looks like. But this story is about doing the ordinary. And let me tell you why I say this. The person with five bags of gold went out and earned what? Five more. A person with two bags went out and earned how many? Two more. The person with one bag of gold did what? He went out and buried it in the ground. And what did Jesus say? What should he have done?

You should have put the money on deposit with the bank so that when I come back, I at least would have earned interest.

I'm going to go a little geek finance on you here for a moment. Do you know how long it takes to double your money in the market? There's a rule, right? Some of you know this, the rule of 72. So, you divide a number by the return that you get with 72 or the number by 72. And so, the example is this. If you can get 9% return on your money year after year, it will take you eight years to double your money. For example, you have \$100 today, you put it in the market, and you can average 9%. What happens in eight years? You have \$200. Okay. Pretty simple concept. What did Jesus say to this man? What do I want you to do? What? At least put your money on deposit? And what would have been his result in eight years? The same if he gets 9%. He may not have, but if he did, what would have been the result? The same as the other people.

What Jesus wasn't saying was you better do something crazy, something amazing in order to hear well done, good and faithful servant. What he was saying was, if you want to be a good and faithful servant, what I need from you is to do the normal thing, the easy thing. In other words, what does it look like for you to use what you've given, where you are? What would it look like for you to be somebody who's been called to be a representative of the kingdom of heaven in your school, in your job, or in your neighborhood? Can you do what it is to be a follower of Jesus by loving your spouse well, parenting well, honoring your parents well, serving the church that I'm part of well, going to work, or taking care of the land that God has given me well? Do you see what he's doing? He is not saying you need to be some kind of radical super Christian. What he's saying is what you need to do is what's in front of you.

Let me put it this way. If you came across the cure for cancer, somebody shared it with you, and you said, wow, that works. But it was not well thought of in the scientific community. People said, I don't know if that's true, we don't believe it. And so, it was a little socially weird to talk about this cure that you knew about. What would you do with that cure? Here's what I'm almost certain you wouldn't do. I'm almost certain that if you had somebody you loved who had cancer, that you wouldn't say, you know, it's a little weird to talk about it because I have this idea about a cure. I've heard about it, but I don't want to be the person who recommends it to you. No, what you would do, is you would say, I want you to know what I know about this. It would be the most natural thing. And here's the thing. When we talk about Jesus words, if you gave somebody that cure, they would be thankful to you. They would say, well done, good and faithful friend of mine, whatever phrase. But if you kept it to yourself, it would not be too harsh to say that's wicked, it's lazy, and it's useless.

And what Jesus I think is doing is he's simply saying, you've been given something. If you're my follower, my slave, use it so that you're not wasting your one and only life. Use what I've given you for my purposes. Now, I would guess that some of us who are gathered here today say, you know what, I've used what I have, I have a lot more to give, and it hasn't been asked of me. I just encourage you to be faithful and patient where you are, because opportunities come.

Some of us are here and we're saying, well, I don't have much to give. I'm young, I don't have a lot of money, and I don't have any gifts. I can't sing. I can't do this. I can't do that. So, I don't have a lot. But maybe for you, just simply saying I'll do what's in front of me or I'll try. It would

be good. I heard somebody once say that the church is full of people who are absolutely convinced that they cannot do what they've never tried.

Or maybe you're here and you're saying, well, I don't really want to take my life and invest it in the cause of another master. I want to be my own master. If you're honest enough to say that I think this story is for you because Jesus' kingdom now, kingdom then, is saying, there's time, you can still change direction. And again, you don't change direction by ultimately building a resumé and saying, I'm trying harder, I'm doing better. You change direction by being convinced of the amazing nature of what Jesus Christ has done for you so that it becomes the natural thing. That's the change of direction.

I saw something a while back. It was online. It was a guy who was on a dating site, and he ended up being lampooned as the worst person of the year for the way he interacted with this woman on this dating site. Evidently, he swiped the correct way, and they had kind of started talking. And then he said something she didn't like. So, she said, I'm out. I'm not going to come to meet you. This was his response and what got him lampooned as the worst person of the year. He said, "So next time you meet a guy of my caliber, instead of trying to turn it around, just get to the gym. I will even give you one free training session, so you don't blow it with the next 8.9 on hot or not ivy league, grad Mensa member, can bench squat leg press over 1200 combined pounds, had lunch with the secretary of defense, has an MBA from a top school in the country, drives a Beemer convertible, has been in 14 major motion pictures, was in Jezebel's best dressed, etc. Oh yeah, that's right. There's not many of us out there." And of course he was lambasted.

Now I read that because one, I find it funny every time I read it. But here's how some of us come to God, and that is we try to build a resumé that says God, look at all this stuff that I've done. I was faithful in this instance. I served you here. I did this again. Those things aren't irrelevant, but we're not called as much to build a resumé as to trust Jesus' resumé and do the thing that's in front of us.

Mother Teresa, in contrast to this worst man of the year, said this once. She said, "I am a little pencil in the hand of a writing God who's sending a love letter to the world." You know what Mother Teresa did with her life? She loved the people in front of her. She served the people in front of her. And she chose to say, I am going to be a pencil in the hand of a letter writing God, who's sending a love letter to the world, to the people in front of me. She didn't bury what God had given her.

And really the invitation today, the opportunity is not to say I need to build a better resumé. It's to say do with the treasure that God has given you what is in front of you day after day. One day when the king comes back to settle accounts, the master comes back, he'll say, well done, my good and faithful slave, enter your master's happiness because you're living with some kind of intentionality, knowing that you're part of something that's bigger than just your own life, your own ends in this world.

God, I ask today that you would help me and each person who's gathered as part of Orchard Hill to respond to your word. Not as much with a let me try harder so one day I can hear these words, but with a sense of amazement that you've entrusted us with the kingdom, and you invite us to participate. God, I ask that you would keep us from resumé building, but instead

help us to rest in your resumé. The resumé of Jesus Christ, the Lord. We pray this in His name. Amen.