Stand Firm in Faithfulness

Matthew 25:14-30
Key Verse: Matthew 25:21
“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!’”

I want to talk a little bit about geysers today. For those who might not be familiar, a geyser is a type of hot spring that erupts with water and steam. There are over one thousand known geysers in the world, so they are pretty rare. Their rarity is because of how they are made. Typically, all geysers are located near active volcanic areas, and the geyser effect is due to the proximity of magma. How it works is that, simply, surface water works its way down to an average depth of around 6,600 feet where it contacts hot rocks. The resultant boiling of the pressurized water results in the geyser effect of hot water and steam spraying out of the geyser's surface vent. The details of this are fascinating. Let me geek out a little. Geysers are hot springs that have water that seeps down over a mile until it meets rock heated by magma. It is a relatively thin column of water. As the column fills, the top cools. The cooler water begins to put pressure on the lower hotter water, acting like a pressure cooker and raising the water temperature at the bottom to above boiling while keeping the water liquid. Eventually the hot water boils and steam bubble rise to the top. When the bubbles reach the top, some of the water spills out and that relieves a little of the pressure on the hot water at the bottom of the column. With the drop in pressure, the superheated water flash boils and expands the column leading to the geyser’s eruption. Eventually, the geyser cools and the process starts over again with water seeping into the hottest spots and pressure building. Most geysers are pretty sporadic in their eruptions and there are variations in the spacing between eruptions and their duration. There is one geyser that is a little different. In Yellowstone National Park there is Old Faithful, and it is called that because of the regularity of its eruptions. It has a bimodal distribution. Right now, the geyser will erupt every 65 minutes if the previous eruption lasts less than 2.5 minutes and every 91 minutes if the previous eruption lasts more than 2.5 minutes. It is very predictable, very reliable, very faithful. It’s like going to the movies when you know what time the show starts. Faithfulness is very important in many aspects of life. The time zones were created so that the trains could run on time from city to city across the country. It meant people would know what time the train would arrive and start. Similarly, if we have such faithfulness and reliability, we can be counted on and trusted. If we are shown to be trustworthy in small things then we will be ready for greater things, and that is just what Jesus is talking about in this passage.

A couple of weeks ago, Mike was up here talking about the end times. A lot of crazy stuff will happen before Jesus’ return. Many of them have already happened, but there are many more still to come. They are like contractions as a new creation is being prepared to be born, but the sign of the end times are not the wars, earthquakes, storms or the love in people’s hearts going cold. Those will come, but they are not the sign. The sign of Jesus’ return is Jesus himself. He will come unexpectedly and the entire world will know what is happening. There will be no doubt that Jesus is back. We can’t make any attempt to try to figure out when he will come back, because no one

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knows, not even Jesus himself. It is not something that we can figure out. Instead, we need to stand firm in our faith. At the end of the passage two weeks ago, Jesus asks, “Who is the faithful and wise servant?” and he talks in more detail about being faithful and wise. Last week, there were ten bridesmaids waiting for the bridegroom. Five were wise and five were fools. The wise ones were prepared because they didn’t know when the bridegroom was coming so they brought extra oil for their lamps. The foolish ones weren’t prepared and just brought their lamps. When the bridegroom gets close, the foolish ones had no oil and wouldn’t be able to see in the dark, they begged the wise ones for some, but there was not enough. The foolish bridesmaids head out to buy some oil, but while they were gone, the bridegroom arrives and the foolish lose out on the festivities because they were not there for the groom’s arrival. This week, we continue the thought about faithful and wise servant. We saw what it means to be wise, and now, Jesus shows us what it means to be faithful, and stand firm in that faithfulness.

Jesus starts this parable, “Again, it will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted his wealth to them.” (14) Jesus begins his parable with a man going away on a trip. He was going to be away for a while and he wanted to make sure his estate was taken care of while he was gone, so the man entrusted some of his servants with his wealth. “To one he gave five bags of gold, to another two bags, and to another one bag, each according to his ability. Then he went on his journey.” (15) The man divvied up the money between three servants, each according to their ability. One servant received 5 bags of gold. Now, one of these bags of gold was worth one talent, which is the equivalent of 20 years of wages. That means the first servant was entrusted with 100 years of wages or the equivalent of $5.2 million. The second servant was entrusted with 2 bags of gold, 2 talents or 40 years’ worth of wages or $2.08 million. The last was entrusted with one bag of gold or equivalently $1.04 million. None of those are small amounts. We see that the master really trusts all of his servants with quite a lot. I don’t know of anybody trusting over a million dollars to me. The master is generous with his trust, but he is not foolish with it. He entrusted the servants according to their ability. To those who had more ability, he entrusted more than those who did not. After everything was divided up, the man went away on his trip.

While he was gone, the servants went to work. “The man who had received five bags of gold went at once and put his money to work and gained five bags more. So also, the one with two bags of gold gained two more. But the man who had received one bag went off, dug a hole in the ground and hid his master’s money.” (16-18) Two of the servants took what the master gave them and put them to work. Maybe they invested it or started a business. At any rate, the money that they had doubled. The first one made an extra $5 million and the second one made an extra $2 million. Having a 100% return on your investment is awesome. Many times, you only get a small percentage. Look at savings accounts today. If you put your money in a savings account, you will have around 0.06%. My retirement account has a 7% rate of return. I have a few stocks in other places and that account has a current rate of return of around 8%. So a 100% rate of return is phenomenal. Then there was the last guy. He just took the money and hid it in the ground. The guy buried a million dollars. What if someone found the money and took it or if he forgot where he buried it? I mean, squirrels forget where they bury nuts all the time. We misplace keys all the time.

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It might be easy to forget where he buried the million bucks.

Let's take a closer look at these three guys. One thing I want to look at is the words "at once". The passage says that the first servant when at once to put the money to work. He went immediately. He did not wait a day or two or a week. He went immediately and the second servant was just like the first. This shows heart and determination to succeed. Think about it. When you are very interested in doing something, you are eager to start the work immediately. When you get your shiny new phone, you want to make sure it is all set up right away. You don't want to wait. It shows your excitement and the first two servants were very excited by the prospect of having so much money at their disposal. The last servant didn't have such excitement. He did go off right away to bury the gold, but it was driven by his fear of the master and not excitement for what was given.

You can also see the same thing when the master returns. "After a long time the master of those servants returned and settled accounts with them. The man who had received five bags of gold brought the other five. 'Master,' he said, 'you entrusted me with five bags of gold. See, I have gained five more.'" (19-20) The first servant was excited to see the master return and wanted to show him all that he had gained in his absence. He could have held some gold back for himself, but instead he showed it all to the master. The servant realized that the money entrusted to him was not given to him. It was not his, it belonged to the master and all the work that was done was done on the master's behalf. The whole time that the master was away, the first servant never stopped working for the master. You see it in some gangster movies. When the mob boss is away, some ambitious underling uses the absence as an opportunity to flex their own muscles and declare their own independence from the mob boss. It usually doesn't bode well for the underling when the mob boss returns. However, here, instead, the first servant was devoted to his master and served him even when away. He was faithful to his master, and the second servant was just the same way. He was eager to show his master what he was up to.

The master responds identically both the first and second servants. "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!'" (21) The master was ecstatic with the servant. He called him a good and faithful servant. He had proven himself to be a trustworthy and reliable person, and, you know, the reward for doing good work is more work. To that end, the master says that he will now be in charge of many things. The same identical thing was said when the second servant came and showed the master what he had done. Now, when you look at the difference between the two servants. The first one had an extra five bags of gold while the second one had two extra bags. It looks like the first one had done better than the second and you might expect the master to approve of the first servant more than the second, but he uses identical language for both servants. In this you can see the master's heart. He wasn't interested in exact amounts. The master was interested in the servant's heart and the fact that they gave it all. In fact, the master didn't expect the second servant to accomplish as much as the first. He gave to them according to their ability.

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Now sometimes when we look at ability, we might think that means abilities and talents. That would mean that the first servant was more talented than the second and third. That might be true, but it could also mean more than that. Not only are we able to do things based on our abilities and talents, but also based on our capacity. There are times in our lives that we are able to do more things than other times because of time or money. A single person has more time than someone who is married with children. If you have young children, it is different than if you have older. Right now, my family runs around like crazy. I work 17 miles to the north in Evanston. My wife works 15 miles to the southwest in Oak Lawn. My son goes to school on 81st street and my daughter goes to school in Old Town. My wife's schedule changes all the time. This upcoming week, she works three evening shifts, while the following week she has none. With such craziness, it can be difficult to do as much as we want, but each person is not judged by what others are able to do, but by what each person is able to do.

Let's look at the parable a little closer and start seeing the meaning. The master is Jesus and he is currently away. He rose into heaven and we are awaiting his return. Jesus promised that he will come back. In the meantime, Jesus has told those who believe to go out and share the good news with the whole world. That can seem daunting, but each of our parts is asked of us according to our ability. Now this means both our abilities and capabilities. Each of us don't have to travel the ends of the earth to share the good news. Some will because it is according to their ability, but others only need to share locally and it will start to snowball. Our ministry serves here on the south side of Chicago to mostly Illinois Tech students, but that community is a global community. By serving here and sharing the good news of the gospel here, we can reach the whole world. There are people who are our family, that attended this very same worship service and came to Bible study who are all around the world. We have family in Korea, Malaysia, Indonesia, Uganda and more. It starts by doing what we can with all that we have. When we do that, Jesus is pleased. Now, I am going to caution you. We are saved only by faith in Jesus alone, but when we serve, we serve out of that faith. Our actions and attitude should be a response to the saving grace that Jesus gives, not as a means of reward and salvation.

The last servant's ability was not a great as the other two for whatever reason, but even with what ability he had, he just buried the gold in the ground. When it was his turn to talk to the master, he simply returned the money. "Then the man who had received one bag of gold 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 gold in the ground. See, here is what belongs to you.'" (24-25) The third servant had a harsh view of his master. He called him a cheat and a thief, and said he was afraid of the master so he just hid the gold in the ground. Again, Jesus is the master and unfortunately, there are people that think that Jesus is a harsh master. There are many people out there that think that God is vengeful and full of wrath, even among believers. Every time someone thinks that God is punishing them, that person is putting God in a harsh light. God has matchless grace and his punishment comes at the final judgment. We can't have this wrong view of God. When we start out with a negative perception of God, then it starts to color everything we see about him. Everything becomes framed in the negative light.

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It looks like the last servant did not have a good relationship with his master. That servant distanced himself from the master and that gave him a negative view of him and that negative view caused him to distance himself even more. He wasn't willing to investigate more about the master. The other two seem to have a good relationship with the master. They were thankful that the master would entrust his wealth to them and they went to work, and when the master returned, they were joyful. Have you ever thought negatively about someone before you ever got to know them? But when you did, your view of them changed immediately? I know that people out there have had a harsh view of me, and may have even been afraid of me. When planning, I bring up all sorts of possible issues and it can look like I don't like the ideas presented, but my motivation is rooted in my desire for the idea to succeed. I want all possible problems to be identified and a plan to be in place in case they crop up, so I bring up the possible problems. If you get to know me, then you can see that, but if you stay away, then you would just think that I am negative all the time and only like my own ideas. Relationships are important, especially that relationship with Jesus.

In the third servant's words, he revealed his truth. He did not have a good relationship with the master, but it was out of laziness. "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.'" (26-27) The servant had a harsh view of the master, but that is not what really drove him to bury it in the ground. If that were truly his intent, then he would have taken the money to the bank so that the master could get his 0.06% savings rate. It would have been a few bucks on top of the million that he would have deposited. If he were so afraid of the master, he should have taken the safe bet, but it was easier to just bury the money in the ground. I believe he was afraid, but he was afraid and lazy. We didn't want to do any work to make it grow. Dragging a bag of gold that weighed 75 pounds to the bank would not be easy, so he didn't do it. We can be like that too, right? Laziness and fear compel us to do a little as possible and just maintain the status quo and hope that that will be enough. But if we do that, there is just anger. He was unfaithful, unreliable.

If you have a watch that can't keep time properly, what do you do with it? You don't coddle it and say it is ok. You either have it fixed or throw it out. Jesus does the same. "So take the bag of gold from him and give it to the one who has ten bags. For whoever has will be given more, and they will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them. And throw that worthless servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." (28-30) The servant was worthless and thrown out into the darkness. If a servant doesn't serve, what good is he?

Being faithful means that we need to give our best to Jesus. We should be faithful, not out of fear of Jesus, but out of love for Jesus. We don't know when he will come back and we can sit in worry or fear, but instead we should do what we should be doing. We should be sharing the message of Jesus with others and growing his church and we should do so according to our ability. Sometimes it is tempting to look at the ability of others and desire what they have, but God judges us according

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to our ability. It didn't matter that one servant started with 5 bags and another with 2, the master was happy that they did their best and those two servants were even able to share in the master's happiness. We are not cogs in a machine. Machines do not share in happiness, but we get to share in Jesus' happiness. We join the party even as we gain more responsibility. If you want more responsibility, then be faithful with what God has given you first, when you are faithful in that, he will give you more. If you try to overreach, you will fail. We don't need to compare notes and be envious of others. Someone might be given more because they have more time or some other special circumstance. In Jesus' eyes, it doesn't matter. What matters is our faithfulness and always standing firm in that faithfulness.

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