

## Sharing in God's Joy

[Matthew 25:14-30](#)

Rev. Allen M. Thompson

First Presbyterian Church of Danville, VA

22 November 2015

This is the fourth and final Sunday in our series on this parable that Jesus told his followers shortly before his death. Our stewardship theme for this year has been “Sharing in God’s Joy,” and that is the title for today because today is the day that we focus on the main character of this story: the master.

Why is the master the main character? Well, aside from having the most speaking parts, the master represents God. Jesus told this story in the midst of his disciples asking him about the end times, when he would return, what it would be like, and how they would know. So the master in this story represents Jesus. Even when he went away on a long journey, he was still the main character.

Even when the master was away, it was his talents and his trust that the servants were putting to use (or in the case of the third servant, *not* putting to use). The master was still the main character in the servants’ lives, because it was his gift that was driving their lives (or should have been). Perhaps the biggest difference between the first two servants and the last one was this:

While the master was away, the first two servants still realized that the master was the main character in *their* lives. Even though the master was gone, they kept on serving. On the other hand, the third servant hid the money away, thereby legally absolving himself of responsibility for it should it become lost or stolen. This begs the question: what was that servant doing the whole time the master was away? What was he doing? His job was to be a servant, but whom was he serving? The master was away, and the third servant had washed his hands of what the master had given him.

So while the first two servants still behaved as if the master was the main character in his life, the third servant behaved as if his main character was himself. You can probably see where I’m going with this: **is Jesus the main character in our lives?** How would we be behaving if he were, and how would we be behaving if he weren’t?

Now, I can’t imagine that any of us *always* manage to act as if Jesus is the main character in our lives. We all have minutes, and hours, and days, or even weeks, months, and years when we probably act more like the third servant than we do the first two servants. The good news there is that time and life are among the gifts that God has given us, and the greatest gift that God has given us is Jesus. This means that no matter where we are, or how far we’ve gone in the wrong direction, we can always turn around. That is what the word, “repent” means: “turn around.”

Of course, we also have times when we *try* to act like the first two servants, but don't exactly double our investment. In this event, we can take some encouragement that the master did not reward the first two servants because of how much they earned, but rather because of their attitude. Their faithful stewardship was not in the doubling of the money, but in using it, in putting it to work.

After all, if the master was worried about the servants squandering his money, then he wouldn't have given it to them in the first place. He would have done like he said to the third servant and just given it to the bankers to loan out at interest. But the master wanted to entrust his money to the servants. The master *wanted* them to go to work with it. The master *wanted* the servants to see what it was like to have use of his gifts.

**In other words, the master *wanted* the servants to share in his joy.**

Here is how the master responded to the first two servants:

“Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful with small things; now I will put you in charge of great things. Come and share in your master's joy.”

Of course, this begs the question: what *is* the master's joy?

Well, let's go all the way back to the beginning. Way back at the start of your Bibles, we have the stories of God creating the world. In the first chapter, we have the days of creation. At the end of each of those days, God looked at what He had created and what did he think about them? We are told that “He saw that it was good.”

Then, on the sixth day, here is what happened:

*Then God said, “Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals,[a] and over all the creatures that move along the ground.”*

*27 So God created mankind in his own image,  
in the image of God he created them;  
male and female he created them.*

*28 God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.”*

*29 Then God said, “I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food. 30 And to all the beasts of the earth and all the birds in the sky and all the creatures that move along the*

*ground—everything that has the breath of life in it—I give every green plant for food.” And it was so.*

*31 God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning—the sixth day.*

Moving on to the next chapter, we are told that on the seventh day, God rested. A few verses later, we are told this:

*15 The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.*

From the very beginning, God saw that what He had made was good. Then, he entrusted it to us and told us to work it.

So, in Jesus’s story that we have been studying this month, putting master’s gifts to work was not just what the first two servants did in response to the master; it was an acknowledgement of God’s original purposes. In fact, we might even say that it was a return to what God had wanted us to do in the first place.

Now, what about the third servant? Well, let’s consider what happened back in the garden, back at the beginning. To make a long story short, God told Adam not to eat from a certain tree. Well, what did Adam do? He and Eve ate from the tree. I guess, technically, Eve ate from it first, but then Adam decided to choose Eve over God. When they heard God coming, they hid in the bushes. God said, “Where are you?” and Adam said, “I hid because I was afraid.”

So what did God do? He expelled them from the garden. They couldn’t be in the garden any more, because when they were given a choice between God and something else, they chose something else. That kind of life can’t hold up in the garden. So while, yeah, God kicked them out of the garden, they had really made the choice themselves. They had rebelled, they had sinned, and they were out.

Fast forward to the story that Jesus tells. What happened with the third servant? Well, instead of putting the master’s gifts to work, he hid them in the ground. When the master came back, the third servant said, “I hid your gift because I was afraid.” So what happened? The master expelled the third servant from the household.

I’m sensing a pattern here...

So let’s go a little deeper. What happened when Adam and Eve chose something else over God? Sin happened. It played out in their two sons, Cain and Abel. Cain was jealous of Abel and killed him, and sin, distrust, and alienation from one another became

the rule of life.

So, why did the third servant hide the money? Well, yes, he was afraid, but why?

I mentioned this last week, but at the time that Jesus was telling this story, there was a law in place that said that if you were entrusted with an amount of money and it got stolen or you lost it, then you were held responsible. But, if you hid it in the ground and it was taken, then you were *not* held responsible. So, what was the third servant doing? He was just trying to keep the money safe from thieves. He was trying to keep the master's gifts safe from sin.

In fact, that was one of the main purposes of the Jewish law: to protect the people from sin. They had oriented their lives around being afraid of sin. That's not necessarily a bad thing in theory, but it can also lead people to operate out of fear, even if that is fear of *other* people's sins. That is what was on the third servant's mind.

So instead of being governed by his responsibility to the master, the third servant was governed by fear. But just like Adam, he got expelled from the household because his attitude was not conducive to being a servant of the master.

Now, if this sounds a little off, or at least a little bit unfair, then consider how it sounded to Jesus's listeners. To them, the first two servants weren't necessarily doing the wrong thing, but they were taking a big risk: putting the master's money to work in the ways they saw fit—and out in the world, no less. They would have understood the third servant's apprehensions.

But the master's responses to each of the servants might have been a bigger shock to them. Not only did the master chastise the third servant for hiding the money; he even suggested giving it to bankers to loan out at interest. Jews were not supposed to charge interest to other Jews, so that meant that Jesus was endorsing the use of the master's gifts by people who were not part of the isolated, selective club. Jesus was willing for his gifts to be put to use in the world in general!

Just as surprising, though, would have been the master's invitation to the first two servants: come and share in your master's joy. Really? These were *servants*! The master wasn't just offering them more responsibility; he was offering them a place at his table, to know what it was like to be him. The master was inviting them to take on his own status...

...almost as if he was inviting them back into the garden.

But here's the thing: Adam and Eve and the third servant all had attitudes that showed that they were not capable of living in the garden (or the household), but the way Jesus

tells this story, the first two servants had attitudes that showed that they *were* capable of living in the garden, in the household of the master.

Jesus was saying that the door is open again. In fact, Jesus is the one who opens that door by paying for our sins, by offering forgiveness for sins, and by inviting us to turn around (to repent). We can choose to live in fear and apprehension, or we can choose to get back to our original purpose: putting to work the gifts that God entrusts to us.

Now, the world today is not exactly the Garden of Eden, but Jesus is also saying that we don't have to be in the garden to have God as the main character in our lives. Likewise, we don't have to wait for Heaven to know what it is like to share in God's joy. We can share in God's joy by using His gifts and seeing the fruit that they bear.

In order to do so, we have to work to make Jesus the main character in our lives. That's not easy, but it is something we have to practice...and if we think about it, we probably put other people and other things at the center of our own lives all the time. Maybe we put our spouse, or our kids, our favorite team, our work, or simply ourselves at the center. When those people and things experience joy, we experience joy. We share in their joy...

...and of course God has given us all of those people and things and God is at work in all of them. But the reality is that at some point, all of those people and things are going to let us down. So, we could base our lives on them, or we could base our lives on the one who gave them.

Even when all of the things that we try to put at the centers of our lives let us down, God is still giving us gifts. They don't even have to be tangible gifts, or obvious talents, either. They could be blessings like health and friends and family and time. How are we using each of those things for God? How can we see His joy in them?

Sharing in God's joy means knowing that He wants to give us gifts and He wants us to use them. Above all, it means that knowing that He has given us the gift of His son Jesus, who gives us the freedom to do work in his name. If Jesus is the main character in our lives, then we will know his joy in the things that give *him* joy.

But if that might sound a bit too theoretical or esoteric, then there is a practical place to begin. We can begin with gratitude. Since this week is Thanksgiving, we already have an excuse to start. Even if Thanksgiving might be tough because of things we've done, or things that have been done to us, or the pain of loss, we can remember God's gifts.

What has God given us? How do we see his joy in those gifts? Do we see God's joy in hiding them and absolving ourselves from them, or do we see His joy in using them and loving them? Are we asking God to help us use them for His sake?

Are we making the most of the gifts that God has given? Are we making the most of the gift of Jesus, who gave his life so that we may know his joy?

As you go this week, count your blessings and know God's joy in giving them to you and seeing you use them for His sake.