

What have we learned about the Last Day over these past couple of weeks? We have learned that it will be sudden, that will come without warning, and so we need to be prepared. We have learned what is going to happen on that day, at least as much as we are able to know. And both of those things, of course, are very important. We need to know those things. But today we learn what we need to do until then. We see a picture and learn what it means to wait for the Last Day. We learn what God has called us to do.

So Jesus tells a parable in our Gospel reading for today of a master who had three slaves. And this master is going away for a while. Where he's going and why he's going ultimately doesn't matter for this story. All that really matters is that he's going to be gone for some time. And so, because he is going to be gone, he brings together his three slaves, and he entrusts to them his property. Somebody has to take care of it while he is gone. And Christians, the master in this parable is a lot like Jesus, because Jesus has gone up into heaven. He has gone away for a while, where he now sits at the right hand of the Father. And even though he comes to us today through the Word and through the Sacraments, it's going to be a long time, potentially, before he comes back visibly again. But before he went up into heaven, Jesus entrusted his work to his Church. We hear very clearly, for example, in Matthew chapter 28. Jesus says: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you." And that's our work, Christians. That's what God has set us to do. God has chosen to save people through preaching and through the proclamation of his Word. Jesus did it while he was here on earth. That was his business. But now he has gone up into heaven and has given this work to us. And this work will continue until the Last Day, when it will finally come to an end. It won't come to an end anytime before that. So we must be about our Father's business until that day.

But the master in this parable gives talents to each one of his slaves. Now, I know that a talent to us most often refers to some inborn gift, some kind of ability that we might have. I might say I have a talent for speaking, a talent for singing, a talent for business, whatever it may be. Somebody's very good at something, they have a talent. And that idea actually comes from this parable, or at least from the way that some people interpret this parable, that God gives us individual inward gifts until the Last Day. But it more literally refers to money. This master gave his money to his slaves. And a talent was actually quite a bit of money. A talent was approximately seventy-five pounds of gold. It's not a small amount of money at all. Or another way to look at it is the amount of money that a worker could expect to make working for twenty years. Half of everything that you have made throughout your entire career would be about a talent. It's a lot of money. And the first slave is given five talents, three hundred seventy-five pounds of gold, a hundred years worth of wages. A very large amount indeed.

But we learned two things from that. First of all, we learn just how important our work really is. Because a hundred years wages is not a small amount of money. That's enormous. That's millions of dollars. But the work which we do for God is much more valuable. And so we should not think of it as being somehow unimportant or somehow not worth our time, nor should we think of it as something that we just do every now and then. The work that God gives us to do is the most important thing of all, because eternity depends upon it, Christians. The work that you do in your jobs is ultimately just work. It will come to an end. But the work which we do for God means the difference between heaven and hell. So we should tremble at that tremendous responsibility which we have, but also take it with the seriousness which it deserves.

The second thing that we learn from this, however, is that the work that God gives to each one of us is not the same. Each one of these slaves had a different amount of talents, and therefore we each have a different duty. Paul puts this very well when he says in 1 Corinthians 12: "Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles?" And of course, the answer is no. We are not all the same. We are all given different responsibilities. We are not each required, for example, to convert the entire world all on our own. God doesn't expect us to do that. Nor does God give the entire responsibility to one person and then no one else has anything to do. But rather he gives to some more and to some less, but to each one something to do until the Last Day. Parents, for example, and especially fathers have a responsibility from God to teach their children. They are called by him to speak of Jesus to them, to show them the way of righteousness. That is the duty that they've been given. That responsibility doesn't belong to anybody else. It belongs to the parents of the children that God has given. And we, for example, as Christians have a duty and a responsibility to witness to our neighbors around us, to those who are closest to us. Yes, we should support mission work far away. That's important too, but not at the expense of those who are nearby. Oliver County should mean more to us than any other place in the world when it comes to carrying out the work of God! And pastors have a greater responsibility, because they are called to preach and to teach. This is why James says that not many should desire to become teachers, because they will be judged with greater strictness. More has been given to them. More will be required of them. So our duties are not the same, but we each have our own work that God has given us to carry out. And we should take that seriously, because this is our work, this is our responsibility until the coming of the Last Day!

But the master in the parable goes away. So what do the slaves do? The first two slaves are faithful to their calling. The one who has the five talents takes the talents, trades with them, makes five talents more. The one who has two talents does the same, makes two talents more. They are doing exactly what their master wanted. But the third is different. The one who has the one talent takes the talent, digs a hole, buries it in the ground. He has no desire to do what his master wants him to do.

But finally, after a long time, the master comes back. And he asks for a report of what each of them have done. And he praises the first two of them for their faithfulness, for their diligence. He says, like he does in verse 21: "Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master." That's wonderful praise to hear from his lips! That's a wonderful thing that he has said. But the reward for their faithfulness is greater still. Because they had been entrusted with little. Even if it might seem like a lot of money to us, it was ultimately very little. And the reward that will come because of their faithfulness will be greater by far. To think of it in terms of this parable, they had been given a little amount of money, but now they will be set over all the wealth of their master. And so also for us. Even though the duties that we have been given by God may be small, we will enter into the endless joys of heaven. The reward will be greater still! Because God calls us to labor for a short time, Christians. Our time of duty will not be long. And eventually the work which we do will be given to others, at least until the Last Day comes. But the reward for that labor will be great, because God does not forget the things done for him, no matter how small those things may be. Even if our entire duty, the only thing that God requires us to do is to teach our own children about Jesus, that is valuable, important work, work that will follow us into eternity! So let us be diligent in the things that God has called us to do.

But Jesus also gives us a warning. The one slave who had the one talent, who hid that one talent, comes back to his master. And he blames his negligence on his master. He said he is the reason why he was afraid. But in reality, that one slave was unwilling to do what his master wanted him to do. He treated his master's absence like a vacation. The boss is gone. I don't need to do anything! I can do whatever I want. And besides, how is he ever going to know? It's not like he's here to see me. And yet the master did come back, and he had to give an account of what he had done to his master. And his one, unused talent said everything that needed to be said. So the master took it from him and gave it to the first. Judgment had come. So we must be diligent, Christians. We must be careful in the things that we have been set to do, because our time is short, either because the Last Day will be here before we know it, or because our own last day will soon come. The opportunities which we have to do what God wants us to do are not endless. Soon the chance to do it at all will be gone. We must work while it is still day, before the night comes when no one can work.

But maybe we want to ask at this point: but what if we struggle with it? What if we find it very difficult to do? What if we can't do it perfectly? Does that mean that we have failed? That God will punish us for what we have done? No. That worthless slave failed because he did not do it at all. Because everything that we do, Christians, is corrupted by sin. We can't get away from it. That's just the reality of living in this sin-corrupted body. Even the evil that I don't want to do is what I keep on doing, as Paul says in Romans. We're not going to get away from that in this life. But there is a night and day difference between the one who struggles to do it and the one who chooses to not do it at all. Because being faithful does not mean doing it perfectly. We should not let the fear of failure drive us away from what God has called us to do. Rather, we should recognize that God will bless everything that we do for him, no matter how feeble it may be. Our work will not be forgotten, and the one who struggles, the one who keeps fighting, the one who runs after God, however imperfectly that may be, will be ready for the Last Day. And the one who does not do it at all, will not. We must run after God in everything that we do.

Because ultimately, Christians--and this is the major point--we do these things out of a love for God. Because the first two slaves, who did what their master wanted them to do, did it because they loved him. The slave who hid his master's money did not love him, but those who did it for him did love him. They worked for him and for nothing else. What mattered to them was not how well they did something. What mattered to them was not how much they did, but their love for their master. The money meant nothing. Who cares how much money it was? Hearing their master's praise meant everything, and that's why they did what they did. So we also should not do these things for gain. We should not do them so that we wonder how well that we are doing them. But rather we do them because of God who has given himself for us. I think Paul puts it very well when he says in Philippians chapter 3: "Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus." The only thing that matters is that, Christians. That's the only thing that drives us forward: the love of God in his Son.

So let us strain forward. Let us press onward. Let us carry out the duty that God has given to us, because Jesus Christ has made us his own, both now and forevermore.

Let us pray. Master God, who has set us to the work of your Church and called us to carry out our duty, strengthen us for the task and help us to do what you would have us do, so that we may glorify you through our labor; in the name of Jesus Christ, who has made us your own, both now and in eternity. Amen.