

“Losers Losing Out” (15Nov2020)  
Matt25:14-30; Zeph1:7,12-18; Ps90

I often start conversations in a Bible study by asking, What do you like here?

It gets to the core of being God’s good news, speaking to us and resonating in us. Since God is for us, a Bible passage should feel good in some way.

But in this reading, it seems we need to clear some stuff out of the way to get to the good. I could ask right now, What *don’t* you like about this reading?

(No reconciliation, but brokenness at the end. It’s not fair. It makes God seem mean. It seems like now. Weeping and gnashing of teeth. Judgment. Punishment. Fear.)

I don’t like the oppressive economics: a really rich man controlling everything, those who have much getting still more. I don’t like that it has been used as if Jesus is endorsing capitalism and financial acquisitions, exactly fitting neoliberal economics even though it’s against the morality of Jesus’ time. I don’t like its inequality—the servants get different amounts, which seems an unnecessary detail for Jesus’ point. It makes me wonder how we’d hear the story differently if the servant with five bags of silver buried it; it’d be truer to life that while the wealthy among us are stingier, the poorer are statistically more generous.

To clarify one aspect and move toward the good, this is not a loan but a gift. Maybe those servants had some sense of what the lord would do with his own resources and could’ve tried to do likewise. But this wasn’t about pleasing him or imitating him; he handed it over, gave it to them. There’s no expectation or recompense. The lord wasn’t in it for a return on investment. It doesn’t have anything to do with earning from him. To reiterate, the first two servants didn’t have to pay the lord back—whatever they did was theirs for the keeping, or the spending. The only expectation (if we can even call it that) is freedom, doing whatever they want.

It’s not the only way to read the parable, but let’s continue this positive angle of flat out handing

over a gift, no strings attached. It’s also worth calculating a bottom line: the guy who got the five bags of silver was handed the equivalent of 100 years’ worth of daily wages. Even one bag meant that guy was essentially offered a 20-year vacation. Quite gracious. What would you do with a gift of 20 years? What would you do if you had nothing to lose? It’s up to you. You’re free.

Framing it as vacation straightens out the main thing I don’t like in the parable: the focus on money. It ends up reinforcing a very literal notion of “earning” something from God. The first reading said wealth won’t save you, but we imagine the parable indicates gaining interest income on cash *is* what saved or condemned the servants. So to get further away from money and investing, instead of bags of silver as the image in the story, we could just as well think of it as vacation, or boxes of Halloween candy, or free tickets, or a reservoir of compliments. We could skip to the point and call it joy and hope and salvation...though it’s not easy to picture a bag of hope.

For today, what if we say it’s a new vehicle—a sports car or an RV or a Tesla or e-bike or hoverboard. Whatever strikes you. This lord gives to his servants the freedom of the open road. Where two of them peel out to see the sites, their dogs’ heads hanging out the window, or even if they just wanted to haul groceries or start a taxi company, still the third ignored it, continued on as if nothing changed, not making use of it at all, looking the gift car in the mouth and parking it.

Jesus has given you the keys to the kingdom. You’re in the driver’s seat. So do you take it for a spin, a Ferris Bueller joy ride, or do you lock it up and set the alarm and tuck it into a storage garage under a dust cover, worried it might get a scratch and depreciate the resale value? Remember: this is a story told by Jesus. He’d go for it just to pick up freaky looking hitchhikers. Or people who were out of bus tokens. Or so somebody could know the thrill of it. Or because that’s what it a vehicle is for—driving is its purpose or vocation, so to speak.

The central issue is that we have so much trouble letting God be gracious and giving, rather

than demanding and keen to punish for the dings and dents. We're constantly trying to sneak requirements in the back door. Well, yes, God loves you unconditionally...but you *should* try to be worthy of such love. (As if it's actually dependent on you ensuring God won't otherwise reject and give up on you.) Sure, God never tires of forgiving you...but you need to put in the effort not to require so much forgiveness. (As if God's grace will reach its limit.) Of course God gives you gifts...but those aren't to squander selfishly since they are really for you to learn the lesson of caretaking and sharing. (As if God threatens—or else!—to take back the gifts.) Definitely God promises life eternal...but you had better make the most of the 70 or 80 years the Psalm allots and not do dumb things that make you less healthy or lively. (As if eternity could be cut short by you failing to exercise, eat healthy, and wear masks.)

Any of these act as if God would suddenly bait-and-switch, that the One who has given you everything and sustains you all along the way would abruptly change God's mind and decide to revoke good as the repo department on all blessings.

The keys to the kingdom weren't for a test drive; it's all yours, and trying to return it to the dealer won't get you very far. And yet, instead of enjoying and celebrating and living into the freedom and making the most of it, we think we need to hide and get defensive. We've got no indication that that's what God is like; it's our own willful misconception to keep entertaining thoughts of smiting and retribution and an unfair God frowning at us.

The sad punchline of the parable (again, if we can call it that) is that makes us losers. We lose out on what God is trying to offer. Not only do we not make the most of it, we make nothing of it. If we leave the new wheels at the dealer, then we're walking home, in the outdoor darkness, which is just a pain.

The story from Jesus is supposed to help you, to be an example to encourage you. So at this point, as a duly designated representative of this gracious Lord, I'll hand over the keys again: For freedom

Christ has set you free (Gal5:1). He loved you even while you were sinners (Rom5:8), and for his sake you are forgiven all your wrongs (Ps79:9). Nothing can separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus (Rom8:39). You are children of light, living with Christ (1Th5), more than conquerors through him (Rom8:37). You are his heirs, inheriting all he has (Gal3:28). He gives you life, breath, and all things (Acts17:25). Come, inherit the kingdom your Father has prepared for you (Matt25:34). It's a pretty sweet ride, and it's all yours.