

A Life That Counts

'Just one life to live, and it will soon be past. Only what's done for Christ will last.' Do you believe that? Many Christians will piously nod to that statement, adding, "Oh yes, indeed. This life is passing away; we must live for eternity. We must make sure we live in light of heaven." But then they live in quite the opposite way.

How about you? Do you believe – not with your lips, but with your life – that the only real things of value are eternal? Perhaps you've heard it said of someone, "They're so heavenly-minded, they're of no earthly good." I've never met such a person. But I have met people who are so earthly-minded, they are of no heavenly good. Jesus taught on this theme and did so with a striking parable.

For the kingdom of heaven is like a man traveling to a far country, who called his own servants and delivered his goods to them. And to one he gave five talents, to another two, and to another one, to each according to his own ability; and immediately he went on a journey. Then he who had received the five talents went and traded with them, and made another five talents. And likewise he who had received two gained two more also. But he who had received one went and dug in the ground, and hid his lord's money. After a long time the lord of those servants came and settled accounts with them.

So he who had received five talents came and brought five other talents, saying, 'Lord, you delivered to me five talents; look, I have gained five more talents besides them.' His lord said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful servant; you were faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord.' He also who had received two talents came and said, 'Lord, you delivered to me two talents; look, I have gained two more talents besides them.' His lord said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord.'

Then he who had received the one talent came and said, 'Lord, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you have not sown, and gathering where you have not scattered seed. And I was afraid, and went and hid your talent in the ground. Look, there you have what is yours.' But his lord answered and said to him, 'You wicked and lazy servant, you knew that I reap where I have not sown, and gather where I have not scattered seed. So you ought to have deposited my money with the bankers, and at my coming I would have received back my own with interest. So take the talent from him, and give it to him who has ten talents. For to everyone who has, more will be given, and he will have abundance; but from him who does not have, even what he has will be taken away. And cast the unprofitable servant into the outer darkness. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'

Matthew 25:14-30

The parable of the talents is really a parable about now and eternity. It's an illustration of how the choices you make in this life will affect you in the next. It graphically pictures two categories of Christians – the faithful, and the slothful. Jesus intended the parable to teach us how we are view our very lives – as slaves managing God's goods. It teaches us to give up on excuses, and to make sure our lives count for God.

The faithful are demonstrated in two slaves – one who received five talents, and the other who received two. Both returned something in keeping with what God put into them. The slothful are pictured in the slave who was given one talent and hid it in the ground. Jesus begins by saying the master gave five talents to one man, two to another and one to the third. He then went on a journey.

In the same way, Christ has entrusted your life to you. All that you are, and have, has been given to you. We like to think we have earned all we have, but the truth is, God opens His hand, and we receive even the opportunities to earn; He closes His hand, and they are gone. All Christians are slaves who are caretakers of the very life God has entrusted us with. Are we faithful or slothful? Let's examine the first category more.

The faithful

Now, it's important to understand why God chose to say one had five talents, one had two, one had one. The point of that is to remind us that God has sovereignly chosen to entrust us all with different things in different amounts. He gives severally to every man as He wills. God's choice of your background, history, education, appearance, experiences, health, intelligence, money, talents, family – are all Sovereign choices on His part.

This means that in God's household, we cannot complain over having too little, nor can we boast in having much. God chooses how much each of His children will receive in all areas of life – from material things to length of life. Why? What is God's purpose in entrusting His servants with these things?

Scripture tells us: we were created for His glory. All we have been entrusted with in life is given to us to return glory to our Creator. In this parable, the slaves went and traded with what they had been given. The two faithful slaves doubled their original amount. That is a picture of multiplying what God has put into you, for God's glory.

The issue was not in the amount they returned. Both the one who returned five and the one who had returned two were rewarded equally when the master returned. Indeed, had the one who had received one talent managed to bring back another one – he too, would have been faithful.

God will not hold you accountable for what you do not have – only for what you do with what you do have. God knows our abilities – He designed them. He will not give us more than we can handle or expect more than we can produce – but He will also not be satisfied with less. That was the case with the slothful slave.

Well, the two faithful slaves exemplify Christians who spend their lives in sacrificial service to God, and not only enjoy seeing fruit now, but are rewarded eternally. The Master's words are heartwarming: *"Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord."*

A fruitful life, and a rewarded eternity. All you do now will matter forever, and the faithful Christian will be rewarded by God. Well, what is the secret of being a faithful servant of God? The answer is in the very word – faithful. It literally means full of faith.

A faithful Christian is not merely one with great staying power, one who endures under pressure and sticks to the task – because there are many who do that without any sense of relationship to the God they claim they are doing it for. No, a faithful Christian is one who has great faith in God. Their day-to-day trust in God is great, and it causes them to obey and seek to please God. It is a life of loving trust in God that inspires and underpins obedient living.

We know **Hebrews 11:6** tells us that without faith it is impossible to please Him. Why? Because without God as the source, motivation and power behind what you do, the high demands of the Christian life are indeed impossible. Only a deep sense of the reliability of God, a continual awareness of Him, will be the lifeblood of a life pleasing to God.

Faith, as A.W. Tozer put it, is the gaze of the soul upon a saving God. It is the inward habit of continually *“looking unto Jesus, the Author and Finisher of our faith”* (**Hebrews 12:2**). Faith is not this mystical law some make it out to be, where you demand God to bless you financially. No, faith is treating the invisible as visible. It is allowing God to be a pressing reality upon your life.

You could say, it's a Godward focus. Such a person is biblically said to be walking with God. When this kind of focus is more the rule rather than the exception – you can be described as full of faith – faithful. Well, what grows faith? The means of grace that grow our faith are no mystery:

1. **Studying the Bible.** *“Faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God.”* The Word is the primary place where we see the glory of God and are changed into the same image.
2. **Prayer.** This grows our faith as we speak intimately with our Lord and behold the answers.
3. **Fellowship with other Christians in a local church.** Here we corporately compare and speak of God's working in our lives.
4. **Obedience.** When we see the hand of God empowering our obedience, our faith grows.

We know these things, but it is up to us to pursue them with our whole heart. The interesting thing is that the closer we get to God, the larger our faith grows, the looser our grip on the things of this world becomes, and these things seem less of a sacrifice to give up. In fact, it seems perfectly reasonable.

That's why **Romans 12:1** tells us that presenting our bodies *“a living sacrifice unto God”* is our reasonable service – it's rational, logical, and simply expected, in light of the truth of who God is. *“Freely you have received, freely give,”* said Jesus when sending out His disciples in **Matthew 10:8**. How true for a life of serving God – freely you have received, freely give.

As we grow, we begin to see – it's not how much of my time, money or abilities I give to God, it's how much of what belongs to Him I use or keep for myself. It's all His. All I have He has given. A life of sacrificial service is not abnormal; it is in touch with reality – since living for yourself is to actually do so with borrowed everything.

We are not now super-spiritual – we are in fact seeing clearly for the first time. We see that all we have was given by God, and to spend it on Him is not doing Him a favour, rather, it is an opportunity to experience the only truly satisfying thing in the universe – God's glory. God says in **Job 41:11**: *"Who has given to Me that I should repay him? Whatever is under the whole heaven is mine."*

Service done for God does not aid or help Him. God is not in our debt for serving Him. It does not meet God's needs. God is clear He has no needs. **Acts 17:25** says: *"Neither is worshipped with men's hands, as though He needed anything, seeing He giveth to all life and breath, and all things."*

So when God gives us an opportunity to serve Him – guess who it really benefits? Guess who truly has their needs met through the experience? Not God – you and I. God didn't need us before He created the universe, and He certainly doesn't need us now. A life of sacrificial service for God, we must then conclude, is the best thing we can do for ourselves.

Yes, we do so unselfishly, but we know and understand that glorifying God by obeying Him from the heart is in fact the closest we come to our original created purpose. Isn't this what the Lord meant when He said in **Matthew 16:25**, *"For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for My sake shall find it."*

Our design instructions are to glorify God and enjoy Him forever. Serving God is a means to this end. God could certainly accomplish the things we do for Him in many better, far more efficient ways. Yet He includes us, so we can know Him better – which is the goal of our lives.

Moses understood this when he spoke to God face to face on the mount in **Exodus 33:13**, saying, *"I pray thee, if I have found grace in Thy sight, shew me now Thy way, that I may know Thee."* Knowing God's commands so he could obey them would enable Moses to know God more. That was the cry of his heart, for just a few verses later he exclaims in adoration, *"I beseech thee, show me Thy glory."*

God also tells us in **Jeremiah 9:23-24** that the only worthy boast a man can make is His personal knowledge of God. And there you have the beautiful circular nature of the Christian life. If you seek to know God – by using all of your life in an obedient pursuit of Him – you end up knowing Him better, your faith grows, and you continue to accomplish more to the glory of God.

Where does it start? Where does a circle start – just get on somewhere! Pursue God in His Word, in prayer, in service in a local church. Again, you will not be held accountable for what you did not have or did not know – only for what you had. God has sovereignly entrusted you

with a certain amount of health, opportunity, abilities, talents, spiritual gifts, wealth, and so on. All that you are, God has shaped and planned.

So, you are to be a mirror for God's glory, a conduit for the grace of God. Mirrors do not boast in themselves, nor do pipes glory in anything except in that which they carry. Are you using all that God has put into you to meet your life's purpose – to glorify God? Are you a faithful slave, who could proudly present to the Master the return earned on what was originally given? You will be, if your view of God from His Word is large. We then come to the second category.

The slothful

The first thing you notice about this man is he is hiding the talent. The slothful Christian lives a self-protective life. He fears losing, and his fear drives him to a self-protective life in which he ultimately loses everything. Again, that is what Jesus meant when saying, *"He that loses his life for My sake will find it, but he who saves his life will lose it"* (**Matthew 16:25**).

This slave hid the money. When the master comes to settle accounts, he presents the unearthed talent. He says, in effect, 'Master, you are an unreasonable man. I was scared, so I hid what you gave me. But no harm done – here it is – safe and sound.'

He is like many Christians who think it will be okay to appear before God at the Judgment Seat of Christ and say, 'Lord, what you asked for was impossible. I was afraid of losing the things you gave me – like a nice comfortable life – so I sheltered it. Anyway, here it is, undamaged. I didn't use my car to pick up children for Sunday School, but you'll be glad to know there isn't a scratch on it.'

Now, how does the master respond? Does he say, 'Well, I understand how fear can be really paralysing. It's alright, thanks for giving this back to me.' No, the master calls the slave wicked and slothful. He does not see him as weak and scared – but as lazy and evil. The master punished this slave by taking away even what he returned.

This is because the master did not want him to simply keep his talent – he wanted him to use it. Paul tells us in **1 Corinthians 3:15** that some Christians will suffer loss at the Judgment Seat of Christ. They will lose possible rewards, as their weak excuses and poor lives burn up in the scrutiny of Christ's gaze.

Now, how does one end up being a slothful Christian? We saw the secret of the faithful Christian, but what makes the slothful Christian tick?

Notice, for starters, that he takes issue with the Master in his excuse. The servant says, 'You are an unreasonable lord. You expect to reap where you haven't sown – you are hard and demanding.' I believe here Christ is illustrating a Christian who hates the idea of faith. How could you expect me to reap where you didn't sow? Sounds like faith – doesn't it?

'How could you expect to gather where you haven't sowed? We might say something like, 'How could I go to a foreign land when You haven't provided all the details I need? How could You expect me to obey that command, when I can't see how it will work out? Your principle of faith is unreasonable – and your demands are too high!'

Now let's be honest – God's demands *are* high – impossibly high – apart from grace. Furthermore, God has included faith as central to pleasing Him. It's not like the Master accuses the servant of lying when he responds.

The problem we have with this servant's remarks is that the other servants did not come to the same conclusion. I mean, they are all serving the same Master here, but the slothful one claims fault with the Master and his methods. Why didn't the others have the same gripe? If the Master was that unfair, none of them would have returned with anything to show.

This servant had a problem with his relationship with the master. The secret of the slothful Christian is this – he is far from God, and so his faith is small. His secret is simply the opposite of the faithful servant – whereas the faithful servant has great faith, he has little or no faith. This slave was lacking in faith, lacking the tenacity to push ahead and make sacrifices.

See, slothfulness and unbelieving self-protectiveness go hand-in hand. You lust after comfort, after a self-controlled, easy life, whereas faith, at least initially, brings great discomfort. It shakes us out of our complacency. The unbelieving cannot see how sacrificing for God is worth it, so they retreat to their comfort zone.

Essentially, faith and sacrifice go hand-in-hand. Because if you are not called to give something up – if you are not called to risk something – then you can control the whole thing, and it really can end up requiring no element of trust. There's no waiting on God to come through if you have it all in hand.

And a faith problem is a relationship problem. Your faith is as big as God is in your eyes. Your faith in God is as big as you think He is able. So when God is small in our eyes, when He is unable to perform His Word, or unwilling, or unreliable to do so, then faith feels like an unreasonable request.

When we are unsure of God's motives or the goodness of His character, then, certainly, God's high demands will seem pie in the sky and unreasonable. It's rather like the reaction you would have to an acquaintance approaching you and saying, would you give up all that you have to help me out? We might consider that for a precious loved one – but such sacrifice seems too risky, even reckless, on someone we hardly know.

That's why many Christians remain where they do – they are so unacquainted with God, that they reason away His calls to absolute discipleship. His high calls to be willing to love Him more than family, to suffer for His name, to give up all for Him, to separate from the world – indeed to even die for Him, these become faraway, impractical concepts that can't be taken literally.

But such a Christian sadly remains in the grey netherworld of doublemindedness. Being afraid to sacrifice, they never experience anything more than their one, buried talent. President Theodore Roosevelt put it this way:

“It’s not the critic that counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbled or where the doer of deeds could have done better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood, who strives valiantly; who errs, and comes short again and again; because there is no effort without error and shortcoming... who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly. Far better is it to dare mighty things, to win glorious triumphs even though checked by failure, than to rank with those poor spirits who neither enjoy nor suffer much because they live in a grey twilight that knows neither victory nor defeat.”

Because they never step out for God, the slothful Christian never experiences God’s faithfulness and power. As such, they hardly have experience in the power and goodness of God, and can never look back on their past and say with joy, ‘Look what God hath wrought! Thus far God has brought me, He will lead me further.’

Because such a person demands to live by sight, they will never step out into the realm where they will experience the very provision and power of God that they doubt exists. What a sad, self-defeating situation.

Notice the Master’s response. He does not deny the servant’s charges. His reply is like this: ‘Since you refused to serve me in faith, why did you not at least serve me in some way? You refused to operate like the others; so be it, could you not at least have banked the money and obtained interest?’

To us, He may say, ‘So, you felt it too high a task to go where I was calling you – why did you not at least do something for Me? Going to the mission field seemed an unreasonable request, why did you not at least drive the church *combi*? Sacrificially giving to missions seemed too much to trust – why did you not at least pray for them? Discipling another believer seemed too much commitment, could you not at least have invited someone to church?’

See, the parable is saying that regarding God’s call for us to live by faith as unreasonable will not be an acceptable reason for not serving. It’s the excuse of the sluggard, “*There is a lion outside, I cannot work!*” is his ridiculous excuse in **Proverbs 22:13**. Refusing to serve God because it’s hard, because it costs and because it seems daunting is hardly a sensible reason for not serving Him at all.

As proven by the success of the other servants, it clearly doesn’t seem to stop everyone. If your faith is small, then serve with what faith you have. Your faith will grow as you grow in the knowledge of God. But that very knowledge of God is gained in obedience to God. You do not grow in your intimate knowledge of Christ by doing nothing.

So once again, we are at a circle. When you decide to obey in faith, you experience God's grace, and your faith grows. When you decide to disobey in unbelief – to passively sit around - your faith shrinks, and you disobey even more.

The faithful one using what they have for God will be entrusted with more. The slothful one hiding what God gave them will eventually lose it all. Ultimately, the most awesome thing of all is the glory of God. Really, that was Adam's original purpose – to display God's glory on the earth, as the crown of His creation. Sin ruined that. But being born again by repentant faith in Christ restores the possibility for that to happen.

The one who reflects this properly, God will be pleased to glorify Himself in them even more. But the one who refuses the privilege to shine for God, will continue to fade. Missionary Jim Elliot said it well when he said, "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep, to gain what he cannot lose."

Where are you today? Faithful, or slothful? The real question is, how big is your God? The bigger God is in your mind – the more you will obey. Consider what's at stake. A poem by Martha Snell Nicholson perhaps sums it up for us:

*When I stand at the judgment seat of Christ
And He shows me His plan for me,
The plan of my life as it might have been
Had He had His way, and I see*

*How I blocked Him here, and I checked Him there,
And I would not yield my will –
Will there be grief in my Savior's eyes,
Grief, though He loves me still?*

*He would have me rich, and I stand there poor,
Stripped of all but His grace,
While memory runs like a hunted thing
Down the paths I cannot retrace.*

*Then my desolate heart will well-nigh break
With the tears that I cannot shed;
I shall cover my face with my empty hands,
I shall bow my uncrowned head...*

*Lord of the years that are left to me,
I give them to Thy hand;
Take me and break me, mould me to
The pattern Thou hast planned!*