

“Graciously Accepted to Live Free”

Matthew 25:14-30

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Prayer for Understanding Gracious Creator of the cosmos and everything in it, we are not sure we know what to do with a love we did not earn. So, startle us again with the good news of your steadfast, everlasting love of everyone. Amen

When you realize you are graciously accepted, you are set free to live life abundantly. God created a spectacular cosmos, joyfully celebrated the goodness, and gave it all away to humanity. God created us in God's image to be responsible for the cosmos. We are stewards of the cosmos, stewards of life, stewards of ourselves. We are designed to create goodness, joyfully celebrate, and give it all away.

Today, we will seek insights from the last parable Jesus taught on earth, the parable of the loaned money also called the parable of the talents. Knowing that you are graciously accepted by God is critical to understanding the parable. God's love is relentless. God always provides a way home. God always forgives. God always is joyfully welcoming everyone home to God's steadfast everlasting love.

Some people were complaining that Jesus was gracious to everyone. They argued that God should put some limits on grace, some limits on forgiveness, qualifiers, that not everyone should be forgiven, healed, perfected, and glorified for eternity, welcomed home to enjoy vibrant community with all, forever. Others argued that a person should need to do something to earn God's love, at least somehow except God's love. As soon as anyone adds any feeling, thought or action necessary to be transformed by grace then it is no longer grace, for grace is the completely free, no strings attached, gift of God. In response to these complainers, Jesus shared parables. The parable of the lost sheep, the shepherd finds the lost sheep, brings the sheep home and all rejoice. The parable of the lost coin, the lost coin is searched for until it is found and all rejoice. The parable of the lost children, one child leaves, wastes money, engages in all sorts of sinful behavior and the parent, sprints out to greet their child, gives them a hug, a robe, a ring and celebrates their return over a huge feast. The other child also lost as they strived to earn their parents love by their work, they thought they were better than the other sibling for their dedicated service. This child is also celebrated as a beloved member of the family. The parable of the mustard seed if one savors even the tiniest, minuscule seed of grace it will flourish, growing from a seed into a plant and beyond to the extraordinary, that plant will transform into a majestic tree, a home for many. The parable of the yeast, a little love shared will feed the world. The parable of the lamp, God has created you good, to shine, to be a light for all.

Jesus is building the church with those who have experienced God's grace and are grateful, messed up, broken people, forming a messed up, broken church that is able to say “no” to all that diminishes life and “yes” to all that enhances life. All the powers of hell will never conquer the church. All the negativity in the world will not diminish your goodness.

Two weeks ago we celebrated Reformation, the rediscovery of God's grace. You are graciously accepted. Everyone is graciously accepted. Every form of darkness, fear, hate, and death is transformed, resurrected, by God's grace.

Today, our parable is the final parable Jesus taught as God incarnate, God in the flesh, Jesus. Two of the people in this parable realize they are graciously accepted. One has not yet experienced grace, they cannot comprehend grace, so they live in fear, perceive scarcity, worry that they are not good enough and have anxiety over their performance review.

Jesus said: **Matthew 25:14-30 NLT** “Again, the Kingdom of Heaven can be illustrated by the story of a man going on a long trip. He called together his servants and entrusted his money to them while he was gone. He gave five bags of silver to one, two bags of silver to another, and one bag of silver to the last—dividing it in proportion to their abilities. He then left on his trip. “The servant who received the five bags of silver began to invest the money and earned five more. The servant with two bags of silver also went to work and earned two more. But the servant who received the one bag of silver dug a hole in the ground and hid the master's money. “After a long time their master returned from his trip and called them to give an account of how they had used his money. The servant to whom he had entrusted the five bags of silver came forward with five more and said, ‘Master, you gave me five bags of silver to invest, and I have earned five more.’ “The master was full of praise. ‘Well done, my good and trustworthy servant. You have been faithful in handling this small amount, so now I will give you many more responsibilities. Let's celebrate together!’ “The servant who had received the two

bags of silver came forward and said, ‘Master, you gave me two bags of silver to invest, and I have earned two more.’ “The master said, ‘Well done, my good and trustworthy servant. You have been faithful in handling this small amount, so now I will give you many more responsibilities. Let’s celebrate together!’ “Then the servant with the one bag of silver came and said, ‘Master, I knew you were a harsh man, harvesting crops you didn’t plant and gathering crops you didn’t cultivate. I was afraid I would lose your money, so I hid it in the earth. Look, here is your money back.’ “But the master replied, ‘You wicked and lazy servant! If you knew I harvested crops I didn’t plant and gathered crops I didn’t cultivate, why didn’t you deposit my money in the bank? At least I could have gotten some interest on it.’ “Then he ordered, ‘Take the money from this servant, and give it to the one with the ten bags of silver. To those who use well what they are given, even more will be given, and they will have an abundance. But from those who do nothing, even what little they have will be taken away. Now throw this useless servant into outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’

Rabbinical law provided that if you do what the third servant did—bury someone else’s money in the ground, you are no longer liable for it because you have done the safest thing. This is critical to understanding this parable. The third servant fulfilled all the requirements of the law by hiding the money in the earth. Jesus is addressing the works righteousness, you need to strive to be a good person, those grumbling about God’s extravagant free grace, people. The reality is the master is generous, giving away money to all, eager to praise and delights in celebrating with their servants. The third servant has a distorted perception of the master. There is no indication that the master is harsh, greedy, or will judge them if they do not multiple the money, however that is the third servant’s perception.

The purpose of the law is to make us aware of our lack of love, our sinfulness, our inability to ever in any form, or way, earn our righteousness, goodness, abundant life, or salvation. Aware of our broken imperfection we perceive that we are saved by grace alone, living in gratitude. Realizing we are graciously accepted, we are able to live free.

The law without a perception of grace often sends one a downward spiral, where the person becomes obsessed with trying to earn their righteousness, goodness, to please others and please God, by their works or beliefs. This can make a person paranoid. Sometimes when someone hurts me, I misinterpret their words and actions. Suddenly, I view everything they say or do in a negative light feeding my hurt. Later, with some perspective, I realize there was no intent to hurt me and often their words and actions had nothing to do with me. That is what is going on in the mind of the third servant. Jesus is striving to reach the grace limiting, we can be good, we can earn it, crowd by putting some of their thoughts in this parable in the words of the master. The reality is the master is generous, giving away money to all, eager to praise and delights in celebrating with their servants. The paranoid perception of the third servant is the master is harsh, judgmental, greedy. Some people view God as harsh, judgmental, and greedy. I have read the entire Bible numerous times. I perceive grace in every story. There are plenty of stories where people perceived God as harsh and judgmental, because they projected their negative views on God, however God is always pure grace. This is a form of transference which most of us do, one unconsciously projects feelings, attitudes, thoughts, and desires we have about a situation or person onto another thing, person, or God. In Jesus’ day, many religious leaders transferred their frustrations onto God, believing God is harsh and judgmental, so they were harsh and judgmental. Read the encounters Jesus had with many of the religious leaders and you will perceive how Jesus was healing them.

The paranoid third servant now adds a layer of judgement from the master. The third servant hears what they have been telling themselves about the master: **If you knew I harvested crops I didn’t plant and gathered crops I didn’t cultivate** and has now added you are “**wicked and lazy**”. This negative line of grace-devoid thinking becomes self-fulfilling as they lose what they have and live in darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. You probably know people like this who view everything in the negative, are judgmental, cynical, and obsessed with getting themselves and the world to live in a different way, their way. They perceive only one right way, their way. I do not perceive any evidence that God ever forcefully takes from one person and gives to another. This would violate free will and God’s gracious nature.

In this parable, I believe the words spoken by the master to the third servant are not the words that were actually spoken for the master is generous, affirming, and desires to celebrate with the servants; instead, the words attributed to the master are the paranoid perceptions of the third servant. When one does not believe they are graciously accepted, life becomes a struggle of trying to please others and often spirals into a miserable life.

It took a lot of words to get to what Biblical Scholar Douglas John Hall identified in a sentence. “God saves us from the awful habit we have of trying to save ourselves.” Listen again. “God saves us from the awful habit we have of trying to save ourselves.”

In contrast, we have two servants who perceive that they are graciously accepted. They are not required to multiple the money, however it comes naturally because grace has set them free to abundant life and extravagant love. They can take bold risks, because they know no matter what they are graciously accepted. They can view failure as a learning experience, because they are graciously accepted. The worth comes from being a beloved child of God and not dependent on anything they do, believe, think, feel, or own.

Jesus is talking about money, and more than money, talents, gifts, abilities, time, and love. Love grows when one is wild in love, vulnerable, eager to love no matter than costs. A quote that I am striving to live is by Hunter Thompson: "Life should not be a journey to the grave with the intention of arriving safely in a pretty and well preserved body, but rather to skid in broadside in a cloud of smoke, thoroughly used up, totally worn out, and loudly proclaiming "Wow! What a Ride!" I am striving to live this quote for two reasons. One, I realize I am graciously accepted, so succeed or fail, I am loved the same, completely, by God. Two, at death I going to get a resurrection body and this body will return to dust.

Jesus was not hesitant to use money to teach about value. A key issue is the value of everyone's life. Everyone has infinite value, because they are graciously accepted. When one perceives that they have value, not based on any efforts, thoughts, feelings, or possessions, rather solely because they are loved by God then a person is able to appreciate life and use life. One is able to risk everything, to give everything away, for they know no matter how much they give they are still graciously accepted and have the same value because they are loved by God.

Pastor E. C. Ennis writes: "It means learning to see the world and one's own life in a whole new way. And that, according to Jesus, begins with knowing how valuable our own lives are and then managing them, investing them, giving them away responsibly."

We have gone full circle. God created a spectacular cosmos, joyfully celebrated the goodness, and gave it all away to humanity. God created us in God's image to be responsible for the cosmos. We are stewards of the cosmos, stewards of life, stewards of ourselves. We are designed to create goodness, joyfully celebrate, and give it all away.

One of the traditional seven deadly sins is "sloth," the refusal to care, the refusal to live, the refusal to be all one can be, the unwillingness to be responsible, the refusal to be compassionate. Sloth is playing it safe. Sloth deceives one into thinking they have a limited amount of love to give causing one to be a stingy lover.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer explained that the sin of respectable people is the refusal to be responsible for the world, to simply stop caring. And political scientists and historians know that not caring, disengaging, the abandonment of individual responsibility is the prelude to tyranny. Bonhoeffer taught that the Christian ethic is being involved and exercising responsibility for the life of the community and nation. And he died for that conviction.

This is a parable about how to use our lives, our resources, our money, our skills, our talents, and our time; how to invest and use our earthly life. George Bernard Shaw wrote: "This is the true joy of life, the being used for a purpose recognized by yourself as a mighty one; the being a force of nature instead of a feverish selfish little clod of ailments and grievances complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy. I want to be thoroughly used up when I die. I rejoice in life for its own sake. Life is no 'brief candle' to me. It is a sort of splendid torch which I have got hold of for the moment, and I want to make it burn as brightly as possible before handing it on to future generations."

In *Thornton Wilder's Our Town*, Emily has died and has returned for a visit. Before she leaves again, she says, "Good bye world. Good bye to clocks ticking. Good bye sunflowers, food, and coffee. Good bye new ironed dresses, hot baths, sleeping and waking up. Oh earth, you are too wonderful for anybody to realize you. Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it? Every, every minute? No. The poets, maybe, they do some. Poets, who are they if not ordinary mortals like you and me? Like them, we possess the power to paint the town, transfigure the day."

God has given you everything, time, love, and life, all as a free gift. Try to preserve your life, to keep your life safe and you will likely be a grumpy, fearful, judgmental, grace denier. Use your life, invest your life, love extravagantly, live in joyful gratitude for being graciously accepted and you will be free to give it all away discovering abundant life. Amen

