

AMAZING GRACE – Part 21
'The Work and Rewards of Grace'

by Rev. Robert Griffith

In Galatians 5:1 the Apostle Paul reminds us that *it is for freedom that Christ has set us free* and so we must learn how to trust the Holy Spirit and operate within the freedom that God has given us in Christ. Throughout this teaching, we've been encouraged to respond to God's love by loving Him back in all ways - but without the shame, the guilt, without obligation or any manipulation. There are great reasons for allowing God's grace to have an effect in us and for working hard - it glorifies God and releases abundant life in us.

In this sermon we are going to examine this further as we look at one of Jesus' most challenging parables. This is the classic 'guilt and manipulation' parable (as preached by many) but an understanding of God's grace in all its truth will set us free from any fear or shame that we may have associated with this story. We have called this story 'The parable of the talents' and we will be reading Matthew's version.

Matthew 25:14-29 *"Again, it will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted his property to them. To one he gave five talents of money, to another two talents, and to another one talent, each according to his ability. Then he went on his journey. The man who had received the five talents went at once and put his money to work and gained five more. So also, the one with the two talents gained two more. But the man who had received the one talent went off, dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money.*

After a long time the master of those servants returned and settled accounts with them. The man who had received the five talents brought the other five. 'Master,' he said, 'you entrusted me with five talents. See, I have gained five more.' His master replied, 'well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness.'

That is what all true believers live for. If you have been touched by the love of the Father and you have received so much that the only response is sheer gratitude, then to hear Him say: *'Well done, good and faithful servant'* is the goal and purpose of life and the final reward you long for.

'The man with the two talents also came. "Master," he said, "you entrusted me with two talents; see, I have gained two more." His master replied, "Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!" Then the man who had received one talent came. "Master," he said, "I knew that you are a hard man, harvesting where you have not sown and gathering where you have not scattered seed. So I was afraid and went out and hid your talent in the ground. See, here is what belongs to you."

His master replied, "You wicked, lazy servant! So you knew that I harvest where I have not sown and gather where I have not scattered seed? Well then, you should have put my money on deposit with the bankers, so that when I returned I would have received it back with interest. Take the talent from him and give it to the one who has the ten talents. For everyone who has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him."

This is a very clear warning against apathy, sloth and laziness in the Church – among Christians. This is a sharp rebuke to those who squander and hide God's grace, or who would put it out of reach of somebody else. On the surface we see a good news - bad news story about three servants. Two of them perform well and get a raise and one of them performs poorly and gets fired. That's on the surface. If you dig deeper you will find this story is really about what God's grace does in you once you receive it; or rather, how you respond to God's grace once it is given. It demonstrates that receiving God's grace can be exciting or it can be dangerous – but it will never be passive – it affects you.

God's grace pulls you more vitally into the joy and happiness of the Master – or it pushes you out of it altogether.

This parable is about how we enter into the fullness of God's joy and participate more in His grace. We are made happy and more free by embracing God's grace more fully. The world says: *'If you ride, then you have to pay.'* The kingdom of God says: *'You get to ride free, and if you like it – you get to do it all over again.'* Let's unpack this passage a little more:

Matthew 25:14-15 *“Again, it will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted his property to them. To one he gave five talents of money, to another two talents, and to another one talent, each according to his ability. Then he went on his journey.”*

The master entrusted his property to his servants. He gave gifts – they hadn't earned it. He trusted them and paid them the highest compliment He could have. He said: *'Here's my property – you take the initiative with it.'* He treated them with respect, and according to their ability.

Matthew 25:16-18 *“The man who had received the five talents went **at once** and put his money to work and gained five more. So also, the one with the two talents gained two more. But the man who had received the one talent went off, dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money.”*

So one man is given five talents and he immediately goes to work. The New Testament translators don't do justice to the original text at times. The Greek word which has been translated here: *'at once'* actually means *'immediately lunged'*. It is the image of a runner down on his hands waiting for the starting gun. The attitude that is conveyed here is that this guy was ready to go for it before he even got the money.

Perhaps that's why he got five talents? So too the man with two talents. The same word is not used in the Greek – but it does say that he did what the first guy did – so it's strongly implied that he *'immediately lunged'* into his new investment also. The power of grace has its own effect. It multiplies, simply because that's what grace does.

This is the heart of this story. God lavishly pours out His estate on us. He freely gives grace to all of us according to our ability to handle it and most people say: *“Let's go for it!”* But some receive God's grace, freedom and gifts but they don't trust Him. They receive God's grace they dig a hole and bury it where they can't enjoy it and where nobody else can either. God's grace is ours free – AND – He expects us to do something with it.

Matthew 25:19-21 *“After a long time (sometimes this stuff isn't decided overnight and you've got to be willing day in and day out to work with God's grace) - the master of those servants returned and settled accounts with them. The man who had received the five talents brought the other five. 'Master,' he said, 'you entrusted me with five talents. See, I have gained five more.' His master replied, 'Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!”*

The same thing happened with the man with two talents. They both said: *'You entrusted me ... You gave me this grace ... I gained more.'* Now some may think this is not a very humble attitude. Some may think a real servant would never take credit for anything. But who ultimately takes the credit here - the Master or the servant? Let's look again. Here we have the first servant paying tribute to the grace of the Master. *'YOU entrusted ME. Thankyou. I am so glad that you gave me the dignity and the joy of trusting me with Your precious heritage. It was all yours and you gave it to me ...'* Then he goes right on in the same breath to say ... *'and I multiplied it! I made it grow. I invested it and I have a whole lot more to bring back to you.'*

So who did it? The answer is **both**. The point is that we do it together. Jesus is not sitting in heaven thinking: *'Gee, I wonder if they're going to steal my glory - I'd better shut that down!'* He is not stupid, neurotic or insecure. He says: *'Well done! YOU - good and faithful servant! You did a great job with that - here, have some more!'*

In Luke's account of this parable, the servant says: *'Master, your talent has gained five more.'* The language behind this is in what they call the 'middle voice.' We don't have it in the English language so we lose the true meaning. The middle voice is not just something I do (active) and it's not something that is done to me or through me (passive) - rather, it is something that God initiates and that I take hold of with my personality and run with it and make it a reality in my life and others. It's the middle voice of participation and partnership.

Now guess what? The whole kingdom of God is in the middle voice! God initiates stuff and then asks us to get in there, get involved and put our personal stamp on His work. It's wonderful - it's amazing that He would do that - but that's why we call this *good news!* What really glorifies God is men and women fully alive! He longs to say: *'Well done!'* - because that glorifies Him and it blesses the children He loves.

This is the crazy thing about following Jesus and enjoying His grace. If you like it, if you put it to work, and enjoy it, and pass it on ... you get some more! The reward for good work is not retirement - it's more work to do! And the work is fun, it's a joy. It's the most fulfilling work known to us. The work is its own reward. That's what the parable says. *'I'll put you in charge of more and more and your joy will increase!'* So the point of this parable is this: if you like life and participate in it ... you'll get more life! One of the reasons you will not hear me pushing people into ministries or trying to get people to do things around here is because the work is its own reward and the workers to whom God says, *"Well done"* are those who willingly respond to his call - not peer pressure or a sense of obligation. They freely accept God's invitation to partner with Him in His mission and ministry.

Now let me say this to everyone in the Church who is currently involved in a ministry of some kind: You can knock yourself out in that ministry. You can do whatever you like - lose sleep over it if you like - but at the end of the day, the Church won't owe you anything. Do it for Jesus or don't do it at all.

Matthew 25:22-23 *"The man with the two talents also came. 'Master,' he said, 'you entrusted me with two talents, see, I have gained two more.' His master replied, 'Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share in your master's happiness.'"*

Whether you're a big star in the eyes of the Church, or a little star, or no star at all - the reward is the same: you get to see God look you right in the eyes and say, *'Well done!'* All you've got to do is pass on what you have.

Matthew 25:24-26 *“Then the man who had received the one talent came. ‘Master,’ he said, ‘I knew that you were a hard man, harvesting where you have not sown and gathering where you have not scattered seed. So I was afraid and went out and hid your talent in the ground. See, here is what belongs to you.’ His master replied, ‘You wicked, lazy servant! So you knew that I harvest where I have not sown and gather where I have not scattered seed? Well then, you should have put my money on deposit with the bankers, so that when I returned I would have received it back with interest.’”*

He didn't even have to work! All he had to do is just get it into circulation, but spitefully and fearfully he stuck it in the ground. If you've been to the Middle East, you know that the ground is 90% rocks. To dig a hole in the ground required some work! There was a determined effort to hide that talent – that gift – to take grace out of circulation, where nobody could get it.

That's the chorus to this parable. So the Master says: *‘Take the talent away from him, and give it to the man who has ten.’* The one who had most, ends up with even more! The dangerous thing about the grace of God is that if you hide it, if you suppress it – it will end up exposing you.

That servant saw the master as a bad, mean-spirited person (which of course, he isn't) and as I've said before, your concept of God will run your life. What you think of God will determine the quality of your life. You will never find a clearer example of that than here in this parable. This man has a misunderstanding of who God is. He was a Pharisee, or had been abused by Pharisees, and so he saw the master as a judge, an oppressor, one who ties up heavy burdens and puts them on his back and doesn't lift a finger to help. He wasn't about to risk losing the talent - so down it goes, underground where it was safe and sound. But the New Testament is very clear about this. If you receive, you are supposed to pass it on.

We are called to be channels, not reservoirs.

If you receive forgiveness, like the servant in Matthew 18 that was forgiven that huge debt, then you need to pass it on to others. If you receive a little joy, then smile at someone – make their life a little happier. If you receive some freedom, then get off someone else's back for a while. If you've been blessed financially, then help someone with it. And if you do – you'll get more! The Bible is very clear - if you sow sparingly, you will reap sparingly.

Now you don't do all of this in order to get more - you do it because you love Jesus and no other reason is valid, but He responds by giving you more. I believe you can have all that you want of anything - provided you don't keep it. When you give it away, you keep getting more – so you can give that away too! So you see if you read what the text actually says, you can't even get guilt, shame or manipulation out of one of the strongest parables Jesus uttered. What the text actually says is: *‘If you like life ... you get more. If you don't like life ... you don't get it.* It's that simple.

It's not whether you win or lose, get 5% or 100% return – it's your attitude towards God's grace and gifts that determines whether you are a good and faithful servant or not – and if your attitude is: *Let's go for it!*' - then prepare to enter more and more into the joy of the Lord.

The parable of the talents talks about what we do with what we have been given. God treats us with dignity and great honour as He gives us responsibility with His treasures. He gives according to His grace and generosity and in accordance with who He has created us to be. His gifting always comes with His enabling. Our eager and passionate response to His grace delights Him. He is glorified when we take Him at His word and throw ourselves unreservedly into the life He gives us. This is our highest purpose – mature fullness of relationship with God.

When we understand and accept grace in all its truth, we won't ask whether we have to work, we will be good and faithful servants without even noticing it! We will just be having the best time of our lives! If you are ready to press into the heart of God and bear fruit in His Kingdom, then have the courage to pray this prayer with me and mean it!

Let's pray:

God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, I declare that I love the life that you've given me and I want more! I love the worship that you've given me, and I want more. I love the people that you've given me, and I want more.

I love the power you've given me to understand your Word and I want more. I love the power you've given me to heal the sick and release my brothers and sisters from the bondage of sin and Satan and I want more. I love life and I want more! Just show me how to manage it wisely – give me wisdom and discernment.

So I ask you Lord to expand my vision of myself, my abilities, my opportunities. Expand my vision of this Church, release us all to shine your light into our community, raise up more people to pray, raise up leaders and equippers and those with a teachable spirit.

Remove the scales from my eyes to see what You see in my community and give me the faith and courage to participate in the grace you've already given me and to move out and claim this place for Jesus. Remove the walls of this Church and the walls in our thinking and let Your ministry grow and grow and grow.

Your kingdom come, Your will be done - right here and now in our hearts, in our Church, in our town and across our nation.

May it be so, Lord, may it be so. Amen!

1. Read through this week's sermon once without taking notes or highlighting anything ... just to get the big picture. Go through the text more closely. Highlighting or underlining key phrases or paragraphs which stand out as significant to you. What single statement impacted you the most? How will that now change your life? Write down what you need to do to respond to God's truth today.

2. Ponder the following statements from this week's sermon. What practical implications could or should flow from each of these statements? If you ask "How then shall I live?" in light of each of these truths, what would be your answer?

The freedom in grace is scary because we become accustomed to being told what to do and what not to do. But grace treats us as an adult – like someone who can be trusted, who has the Holy Spirit in them to help them manage their Christian life and ministry.

God's grace pulls you more vitally into the joy and happiness of the Master – or it pushes you out of it altogether.

One of the interesting things about reading the Bible is that if you think you already know what it means before you go to it, you will not hear anything new. But if you actually read what it says, it will take you apart and reconstruct you.

When we understand and accept grace in all its truth, we won't ask whether we have to work, we will be good and faithful servants without even noticing it! We will just be having the best time of our lives!