

# YOUR REWARD

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Last week, we heard three stories from the 25<sup>th</sup> chapter of Matthew that Jesus told when He was asked about His return and the end of the age. Each story revealed the nature of a relationship that Jesus was seeking to develop among His followers, and the rewards those relationships would gain.

## **Devoted**

The first was the story of ten bridesmaids—five wise and five foolish. It was a tale of Devoted Friendships—prepared for distance, waiting, testing, self-care, and possible rejection. These are the circumstances that test friendships and prove their devotion.

Every friendship faces such trials. For some we are prepared, while others catch us off guard and ill-equipped. And every friendship has a passive side and an active side. For friendship itself comes to us; it dawns like the morning sun. We cannot plan it; we cannot arrange it. We feel it; it rises within us like a warm glow. It is the warmth of shared ideas and feelings, shared interests and experiences. This side of friendship, however, is fickle—subject to emotional ups and downs. This kind of friendship, though radiant at the start, cannot endure without the active side.

The active side of friendship demands decisions: Will I hope? Will I tolerate? Will I wait? Will I forgive? No passive, self-centered friendship will survive the storms of real life. This real-life preparation is what Jesus was reaching for in His disciples. Did they have the necessary resources? Did they know how to replenish those resources? Were they prepared to endure. Were they devoted friends of His?

Saul from Tarsus, later named Paul experienced a turbulent, though effective ministry. Breaking new ground by bringing the Good News message of Jesus Christ to people outside the Jewish faith, he encountered sometimes severe opposition and sluggish faith. His respect for Peter, who had been an eyewitness of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, did not prevent him from confronting Peter's dissembling behavior, when Peter's long-time Jewish friends led him into hypocrisy before the recently converted Gentile brethren.

Peter had become accustomed to fellowship with the Gentile Christians and ate freely with them, until his Jewish friends arrived from Jerusalem. Embarrassed in front of them at how "Gentile" his behavior had become, Peter retreated to the old Jewish mealtime customs, and other Jewish Christians took notice and began to follow suit. Old habits die hard. Older friendships threaten to trump new ones. Paul recognized this as a departure from living by faith and called him on it. Revelation demands obedience; older customs must yield to living as faith directs. It is a test of true friendship.

When Paul and Barnabas were set apart by the Holy Spirit for missionary ministry, they became a strong team, planting churches among the Gentiles in many regions of the Middle East. At one point, Barnabas suggested that his cousin, John Mark, would be a help to their mission, so they brought him with them. But the trip proved too much for the young believer, and Mark left them to return home. Later, when Barnabas wanted Mark to rejoin their team, Paul resisted strongly because he thought Mark undependable. Their disagreement divided the team; Barnabas took Mark and went in one direction, while Paul chose Silas and went in another direction. Perhaps the result was a weaker team, or a multiplication of teams, or both. What we do know is that their friendship survived this storm and they were all reunited in later years, and Mark became a significant helper to Paul.

Some friendships don't require much maintenance. Others are tested, sometimes severely. When they are, will you become active in preserving or restoring them, or will you cast them aside? Active friendships are devoted friendships.

## **Faithful**

The second story was about three servants who were each given a task appropriate to their abilities, and made to report on their success. This was a parable of Faithful Service—prepared to work, to risk, to invest, to lose, to gain, at last to turn it over, to receive a reward. For these are the challenges that prove faithfulness in service.

We have each received so many gifts during our lifetime—relationships, abilities, opportunities, and grace (so much grace). Some we have received with thankfulness, others we have taken for granted or ignored, some we have openly despised. Yet these gifts are what makes or breaks our record of service in life. God has suited our gifts to our opportunities and challenges. If we receive them attentively and apply them intentionally, we shall be blessed in our service and rewarded in the end.

The active side of service demands faithfulness—that attentive and intentional reliance upon God and those people He brings into our lives. None of us can stand or succeed alone; we weren't made to. We were made to work together. Insisting on going it alone only demonstrates that we distrust even God and despise His gifts. Faithfulness involves yielding to the will of God, accepting His provision (whether more or less than what we expected), developing new skills, leaning on others, enduring setbacks, persevering through difficulties, and steadily moving forward.

Cephas, also known as Peter, was a strong man with ardent desire to please the Lord. But he was also an impetuous man—emotional and impulsive. This generated agonizing trials, both for him and for those close to him. When faced with a challenge, Peter naturally “knew” what should be done, and didn't hesitate to announce it. When scolded by Jesus for his brashness, his bravado, his thoughtlessness, his ignorance—he took it reasonably well, but was a slow learner. Would he ever lose his sharp edge? Would he ever think twice before speaking?

Effective service requires both, and much more. Faithfulness can only grow over time, with intentionality and repeated application. Faith may be a gift, but faithfulness is a fruit of the Spirit, and fruit production takes time and careful attention.

In the end, Peter became that “rock” of a leader that Jesus needed, and is recognized by many millions as the founder of the present day church. Is your service to Christ faithful, or just busy? What can you do this week to make it more faithful, more yielded, more obedient, more trustworthy?

## **Selfless**

Jesus' third story was about two groups of people—one sensitive and caring, the other indifferent and self-absorbed. It was an account of Selfless Compassion—prepared to help, sensitive to the plight of others, blessed to be a blessing, filled up to be poured out, asking nothing in return, giving out of extravagant love. Nothing can develop these traits in us but the unrelenting trials and misfortunes of our lives and of those around us. If we do not feel pain ourselves, we will not care when others do. But the danger exists that we will choose to meet our own pain with denial and masking, instead of prayer and faithfulness; the result will be self-protective denial and indifference toward others.

The world is full of more need than we can hope to meet or eliminate. No advances of technology, science, economy, or politics can fill the great well of human need. But God can, and He will, in His own time. For the present, we (His church) are tasked with pouring into that gap. It is the church's opportunity to shine!

We have been chosen, called, and anointed to be God's hands extended. Not from our fullness, but from our emptiness, our poverty, and our brokenness, in desperate reliance upon the One who supplies our needs “according to His glorious riches in Christ Jesus.”

Sitting with His disciples near the Temple treasury, Jesus watched as those coming to pray filed past the treasury box and dropped in their donations. Many opened their purses, took something from the top and put it into the box. One widow woman unwrapped a small cloth bundle she carried in her hand, removed the only two

coins that were in it, and placed them in the box. Jesus alerted His disciples to this, saying, "Most have given out of their abundance, but this woman has given all that she had!" It's not the amount of money that God notices, it's the amount of generosity.

We say, "If I just had more to give, then I would give more." Who are we kidding? Having more does not make people more generous; it makes them more afraid of losing what they have, and more tight-fisted. If we will not respond and give when we have little, but focus what little we have on ourselves, we will not give significantly when we have much. It is a matter of the heart, not the wallet.

This reminds me of Eddie Ogan's story (she would be almost 80 today). I think you'll appreciate it.

"I'll never forget Easter 1946. I was 14, my little sister Ocy was 12, and my older sister Darlene 16. We lived at home with our mother, and the four of us knew what it was to do without many things. My dad had died five years before, leaving Mom with seven school kids to raise and no money.

"By 1946 my older sisters were married and my brothers had left home. A month before Easter the pastor of our church announced that a special Easter offering would be taken to help a poor family. He asked everyone to save and give sacrificially.

"When we got home, we talked about what we could do. We decided to buy 50 pounds of potatoes and live on them for a month. This would allow us to save \$20 of our grocery money for the offering. When we thought that if we kept our electric lights turned out as much as possible and didn't listen to the radio, we'd save money on that month's electric bill. Darlene got as many house and yard cleaning jobs as possible, and both of us babysat for everyone we could. For 15 cents we could buy enough cotton loops to make three pot holders to sell for \$1. We made \$20 on pot holders. That month was one of the best of our lives.

"Every day we counted the money to see how much we had saved. At night we'd sit in the dark and talk about how the poor family was going to enjoy having the money the church would give them. We had about 80 people in church, so figured that whatever amount of money we had to give, the offering would surely be 20 times that much. After all, every Sunday the pastor had reminded everyone to save for the sacrificial offering.

"The day before Easter, Ocy and I walked to the grocery store and got the manager to give us three crisp \$20 bills and one \$10 bill for all our change. We ran all the way home to show Mom and Darlene. We had never had so much money before.

"That night we were so excited we could hardly sleep. We didn't care that we wouldn't have new clothes for Easter; we had \$70 for the sacrificial offering.

"We could hardly wait to get to church! On Sunday morning, rain was pouring. We didn't own an umbrella, and the church was over a mile from our home, but it didn't seem to matter how wet we got. Darlene had cardboard in her shoes to fill the holes. The cardboard came apart, and her feet got wet.

"But we sat in church proudly. I heard some teenagers talking about the Smith girls having on their old dresses. I looked at them in their new clothes, and I felt rich. When the sacrificial offering was taken, we were sitting on the second row from the front. Mom put in the \$10 bill, and each of us kids put in a \$20.

"As we walked home after church, we sang all the way. At lunch Mom had a surprise for us. She had bought a dozen eggs, and we had boiled Easter eggs with our fried potatoes! Late that afternoon the minister drove up in his car. Mom went to the door, talked with him for a moment, and then came back with an envelope in her hand. We asked what it was, but she didn't say a word. She opened the envelope and out fell a bunch of money. There were three crisp \$20 bills, one \$10 and seventeen \$1 bills.

"Mom put the money back in the envelope. We didn't talk, just sat and stared at the floor. We had gone from feeling like millionaires to feeling like poor white trash. We kids had such a happy life that we felt sorry for anyone who didn't have our Mom and Dad for parents and a house full of brothers and sisters and other kids visit-

ing constantly. We thought it was fun to share silverware and see whether we got the spoon or the fork that night.

“We had two knives that we passed around to whoever needed them. I knew we didn't have a lot of things that other people had, but I'd never thought we were poor.

“That Easter day I found out we were. The minister had brought us the money for the poor family, so we must be poor. I didn't like being poor. I looked at my dress and worn-out shoes and felt so ashamed--I didn't even want to go back to church. Everyone there probably already knew we were poor!

“I thought about school. I was in the ninth grade and at the top of my class of over 100 students. I wondered if the kids at school knew that we were poor. I decided that I could quit school since I had finished the eighth grade. That was all the law required at that time. We sat in silence for a long time. Then it got dark, and we went to bed. All that week, we girls went to school and came home, and no one talked much. Finally on Saturday, Mom asked us what we wanted to do with the money. What did poor people do with money? We didn't know. We'd never known we were poor. We didn't want to go to church on Sunday, but Mom said we had to. Although it was a sunny day, we didn't talk on the way.

“Mom started to sing, but no one joined in and she only sang one verse. At church we had a missionary speaker. He talked about how churches in Africa made buildings out of sun dried bricks, but they needed money to buy roofs. He said \$100 would put a roof on a church. The minister said, "Can't we all sacrifice to help these poor people?" We looked at each other and smiled for the first time in a week.

“Mom reached into her purse and pulled out the envelope. She passed it to Darlene. Darlene gave it to me, and I handed it to Ocy. Ocy put it in the offering.

“When the offering was counted, the minister announced that it was a little over \$100. The missionary was excited. He hadn't expected such a large offering from our small church. He said, "You must have some rich people in this church."

“Suddenly it struck us! We had given \$87 of that "little over \$100." We were the rich family in the church! Hadn't the missionary said so? From that day on I've never been poor again. I've always remembered how rich I am because I have Jesus!”

Last week we learned “what” mattered to the Lord. This week, we have seen “how” to please Him.

Now, just do it.