

SM059 The Noble Prince and the Worthless Servant

It was time to leave. Jesus and his disciples were in Jericho where they had spent the night. Jesus had not intended to stay there. He had graciously refused the hospitality of the village elders because of his desire to travel on to Jerusalem. This offended the leaders of the city, but they were enraged when he changed his plans to lodge at the house of Zacchaeus the tax collector, the most despised man in the city.

It was a festive time as Zacchaeus hosted Jesus and his disciples. The tax collector revealed his true heart for God and the salvation of God's kingdom came to Zacchaeus' house that day. All who attended the feast rejoiced over God's mercy to this man. On Jesus' visit to Jericho he had healed two blind men, Blind Bartimaeus who begged outside the city gates, and Zacchaeus whose eyes were opened to see the kingdom of God and to enter it with joy.

But now it was time to leave and as Jesus and his disciples left the gates of Zacchaeus' villa, they were greeted by a large multitude who were ready to take the long, 17-mile walk, from the valley floor in which Jericho lay, to Mount Zion on which Jerusalem stood.

Jesus looked at the multitudes and said, "The journey before us is long and hard. Today, we are walking up to Jerusalem. There, I will do my Father's will. There, the kingdom of God will be established. There, God will work an extraordinary work that will change the world forever!" And with those words, Jesus set off, walked through the gates of Jericho, and started the long ascent to Jerusalem.

The multitudes who listened and who followed were filled with excitement. They began to say, "Jesus is going to establish the kingdom!"

"At last the promises of the kingdom will be fulfilled!"

"The sun will no longer shine, the moon will turn to blood, and the stars will fall from the sky, just as the prophets foretold," another stated with breathless excitement.

This talk went on for some time. Jesus heard it and his heart was troubled. Did these people still not understand? Finally, Jesus had heard enough. He stopped, pulled the twelve apostles aside and said, "Listen, we are going up to Jerusalem, and I will be delivered to the chief priests and the scribes. They will condemn me to death and will hand me over to the Gentiles. They will mock me and spit on me, and scourge me and kill me. And three days later I will rise again. Do not listen to what the people are saying."

"But Lord, you said you were going to Jerusalem to establish the kingdom, to do the will of God. That can mean only one thing – that you will drive out the Romans, that you will take your seat in Jerusalem and rule over all."

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“Yes, it does mean only one thing,” Jesus replied. “But have I been with you so long and you still do not understand the kingdom of God?” Then Jesus said to the multitude who were travelling with them to Jerusalem.

“Listen, all of you. You have been talking about the kingdom of God and thinking that it will appear immediately. Let me tell you a story to help you understand what God is doing.” And the people gathered around to listen.

A noble prince ruled over a territory with its many cities. But he had many enemies who did not want him to rule over them. An insurrection threatened to erupt, and the noble prince knew he had only one chance to prevent war and maintain peace in his land. He must travel to the emperor over the sea, lay his claims before him, and receive his authority to reign.

The noble prince knew his journey would be risky and he knew that in his absence his enemies would stir up trouble. He called ten of his servants to him and said, “You know that the land is in turmoil. You know many enemies are among us, and you know that I am the rightful ruler of this land. But many who are selfish and hungry for power are against me, and they are rising against us. I am traveling to see the emperor and to receive his authority to reign. I want to lay this problem to rest once and for all about who is the rightful ruler. Only in this way will there be peace and safety for all. In my absence, your work will be crucial. You are my representatives. You must stay faithful and loyal to me and even though it will be dangerous to do so.

The noble prince spoke to another servant and said, “Bring out the money,” and the servant retrieved a small, but beautiful chest. The noble prince commanded that the chest be opened and inside were ten precious coins, each worth one hundred days’ wages! The servants’ eyes opened wide. They knew the noble prince was wealthy, but they had never seen such wealth in front of them in all the days they had served.

The noble prince said, “Each of you, come forward,” and one by one the ten servants walked to the noble prince who said, “I am giving you one hundred days’ wage. Take this money. Use it wisely. Use it to promote our business, our cause, and our name in my absence until I return.” The noble prince dismissed the servants and the next day embarked on his journey to see the emperor who lived beyond the sea.

The ten servants knew their task was important, and they knew that it also brought danger. As they travelled throughout the noble prince’s territory and used their money to advance the cause of their master, they heard many of the citizens saying, “We don’t want this man to reign over us. We don’t want his kingdom, and we don’t like the way he does things. Let’s form our own delegation to visit the emperor. There we will lay our own claim to the throne and we will have the power for ourselves.”

These were words of insurrection, and the servants knew that if this uprising succeeded their lives would be in danger for in getting rid of the noble prince and all that belonged to him, they would also get rid of his loyal servants. Nine of the ten servants, however, were undaunted by the fear and they continued faithfully in their work with the money the master had given. But one man grew afraid. He listened to the complaints of the citizens who were rebelling. One man said, “This noble

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prince is not noble at all. He plunders the property of others. He sends some of his servants to raid and to steal what belongs to others.” This, of course, was a lie, but the servant believed what the people were saying, and he became very afraid of them and of his master.

He knew that if he openly identified with his master, and if his master failed in his mission to the emperor, then his life would be lost. But he also feared going over to the other side. “What shall I do?” the servant said. “If I use my master’s money to advance his cause in his land, everyone will know that I belong to him. And if he fails in his journey, I may lose my life. But if I use my money for those who are rebelling, I will be branded a traitor to my master. The people are saying he is a ruthless man who plunders others. He would kill me.” And so, the servant put the money in a cloth and did nothing with it.

For months, the struggle went on – the people of the land creating unrest and nine of the ten servants courageously advancing the businesses and the causes of the noble prince despite the danger they faced. And then, one day, the noble prince returned! He was victorious. The emperor had declared him to be the true ruler of the land, and the citizens who were rebelling were wrong!

When the noble ruler returned to his great house, he called the leaders of the rebellious citizens and his ten servants together and said, “I have returned from my great journey, and today I will have an account of all that you have done. First, my servants, what have you done with the money that I have entrusted to you.” The first stepped forward and said, “Master, with the money you gave I have advanced your cause in the land and I have made ten times more for you.” And the noble prince said, “Well done, faithful servant. You have been faithful to me in these things. Because of this, I appoint you to rule over ten of my cities.”

A second servant came to him and said, “Master, with your money that you entrusted to me I have advanced your name in the land and I have made five times as much for you.” And the master said, “Well done, faithful servant. You have been faithful to me in these things. Because of this, I appoint you to rule over five of my cities.”

This went on for some time as the other servants proudly told their master of their faithful work for him. Finally, the tenth servant came forward. He was trembling. He was afraid, and he said, “Master, I heard that you are a ruthless man. That you are a great chieftain and that you gain your wealth by plunder. You take what is not yours. You reap where you do not sow. You gain from the loss of others. I have come to fear you, master. Yet, here is your money. I did nothing with it, but I did keep it safe for you since it is yours.”

The master looked at the servant gravely, and then said, “Worthless slave! So, you think that I am a looter? You think this is the kind of man I am? That others put in their hard work, and I take from them? That others sow and I reap their crops with injustice? You think this is the kind of man I am?”

The servant started to raise his hands to defend himself, but what could he say? That is what he believed, and he hung his head in shame. The master continued,

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“If this is what you truly think about me, that I am this kind of unjust man, why then did you not put my money in the bank – even with unjust bankers who charge high interest rates so that I might at least have gained something? But you did nothing!”

“By your own words I will judge you. If you think that is the way I am, then, that is the way I will be with you,” and the master said to one of his servants, “Take the coin from this man, and give it to the man who gained ten coins.”

And that servant said, “Master, he has ten coins already,” but the master said, “Take the coin from this man and give it to one who has ten!”

And then the master said, “You know that I went away to maintain my right to rule this land because many enemies have risen against me. I now speak to you, my enemies, who have questioned by authority, and I declare that I am the rightful lord of this land. But you have rebelled against me. You wanted the kingdom for yourself, and I condemn you to die.” And the master turned to his servants and said, “kill them all for they have rebelled against me.”

Jesus was finished with his story. He looked at his twelve disciples. He looked at the crowds and he said again, “I say to all of you, to those who have, more shall be given, but those, like the worthless servant who do nothing, even what they have will be taken away. I am going to Jerusalem for the kingdom of God” and he turned and continued walking up the long road to the great city.

For a long while no one spoke of the kingdom. No one spoke of what God might do to the Romans or what God might do for his people. All pondered the meaning of the parable and wondered if what they had would be taken from them.

When we return we will explain why Jesus told this story, what it meant for his people and what it means for us.

Interlude

What did this story mean? The servants in the parable represented the people of God who were serving him. Throughout their history, many of God’s people heroically served him even though it was not the popular thing to do and even though it brought great danger to them. We think of Moses, David, the prophets, Daniel, Ezra, and Nehemiah just to name a few. These men served God faithfully and advanced the name of God among their people and in the world.

The citizens who did not want the noble prince to rule over them represented those among God’s people who did not have a heart for God and his way of bringing the kingdom into the world. They wanted to do things their way. They wanted the kingdom for their benefit and their pleasure.

And the noble prince? He represented God himself. He was the king of the people as it says in the prophet Isaiah, “The Lord is our king, the Lord is our lawgiver, the Lord is our judge.” He was the true God of heaven and earth and he was the rightful ruler of all.

God had often manifested his glory among his people. He showed his glory in leading them through the great and terrible wilderness. He revealed his glory in the tent of meeting where he met with

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Moses. He revealed his glory in the temple that Solomon built, and he revealed his glory to the prophets like Isaiah and Daniel. But despite these gracious acts toward his people, his people rebelled. Again, and again, they spurned his love and misrepresented him to the world. They refused to do his will and wanted his blessings for themselves and not for God's glory and one day, God left the people just as the noble prince left the land.

The prophet Ezekiel spoke of the glory of God leaving the temple, the city, and the land and the people were given over to the rapacious Gentile nations that devoured them like wild beasts. But God was not finished with his people. He promised that he would return, that he would bring his kingdom, and that he would rule over his people. He promised that he would come to his temple, to his city, to his land and would establish the kingdom, his rightful authority over the people and the land for it belonged to him.

And the people waited. For hundreds of years they waited and with the gifts God gave they served him and advanced his cause in a dangerous world where the Gentile nations and many among his people did not want God to rule.

But one day, God returned. But it was not like what the people expected. The people expected him to come as a conquering hero, to save them and to bring judgment to the Romans. But when God came, he came as a humble servant who washed the feet of others, who healed the fevered sick, who made the limbs of the lame strong, who gave sight to the blind, and who cleansed and renewed sinful people bringing them back to himself like a loving shepherd finding lost sheep.

Some recognized that in Jesus their God was coming to them. Some recognized that in Jesus the prophecies of the kingdom were starting to find their fulfillment. They were like the nine servants who did something with the money the master in the story gave them. Others, though, continued to rebel and some, like the worthless servant, did nothing.

Why did the worthless servant do nothing with his coin? He did nothing because he was afraid of those who were openly rebelling. What if the noble prince never came back? He would be on the wrong side, and so he did nothing because he feared that if he was on the wrong side he would lose his life to those who were rebelling.

The worthless servant also did nothing because he had a twisted understanding of his master's character. In the ancient world, many masters were ruthless men who plundered the innocent. The worthless servant came to believe that his master was this way. He did not know what his master was really like just as many people in that time and ours did not know what God was really like. They did not know that he was a just God who was righteous and faithful to his covenant and a God of grace and mercy.

The coin that the worthless servant kept was taken from him and given to one who was faithful, and in the parable, we find these familiar words of Jesus, "To him who has shall more be given but to the one who does not have, even what he has will be taken away." And what does this mean? It means that those who have faith and humility toward God will receive even more, but those who do nothing, those who rebel, whatever blessings of God they have received up to that point, will be lost forever.

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And what about the citizens who rebelled and who were slain? These represented the ancient nation of God's people who were slain 40 years after Jesus came when Roman armies invaded and destroyed the land, Jerusalem, and the temple. Jesus had warned this would happen if they did not embrace his kingdom of loving one's enemies, of going the extra mile, of praying for those who hurt them, of serving people. Jesus had warned this would happen if they insisted on following their way and setting up their kind of kingdom which was to confront their enemies and destroy them rather than seek to save them.

When Jesus was walking toward Jerusalem, the people thought the kingdom would appear immediately and that it would bring blessing to them and destruction to the rest of the world. But Jesus told them that the opposite would happen if they did not submit to him and to his way of bringing the kingdom. Blessings would be taken away and judgment would come to the rebellious.

But what about us? What does this mean for us? We must ask ourselves, "Who am I like in the parable? Am I the rebellious citizens who do not want the rightful king to rule? Am I the worthless servant who was afraid and who did nothing with the coin the master gave him, the worthless servant who listened to lies and who had a wrong view of his master? Or, am I like the nine faithful servants who took the blessing of their master and who did something with it?"

This, my friends, is the story of the Noble Prince and the Worthless Servant, a story that pierced the hearts of those who heard it in Jesus' day, and a story that should pierce our hearts as well.