

Title: Adventurous Faith Wins the Prize
Text: Luke 19:12-27
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Its 33 days. 33 days until the London 2012 Olympics start; 33 days until we all become bleary eyed patriots watching sports we only ever contemplate watching every four years. Suddenly we will all be experts on rowing and trap shooting and the finer art of springboard diving – any sport where Australia has a chance to medal.

One of our great medal hopes is Sally Pearson. Not only is she Australian, she's a Queenslander. Not only is she a Queenslander, she is a Gold Coast local!

Here is a clip of Sally Pearson winning the 100metre hurdles at the 2011 World Championships in a record time of 12.28 seconds.

PLAY CLIP

Hurdles' racing is brutal. One misstep, one foot wrong, one mistiming and down you can come down with the hurdle.

Watch Sally's face. She knows where the hurdles are. But she also knows where the finish line is. She strains for it. She presses for it. She races for it.

The writer of Hebrews used athletic racing as a metaphor for the Christian life of faith. This is how Eugene Peterson puts it in the Message Translation:

Strip down, start running—and never quit! No extra spiritual fat, no parasitic sins. Keep your eyes on Jesus, who both began and finished this race we're in.
(The Message)

Last week we named the fact that:

Adventurous Faith Perseveres with Hope

Adventurous Faith presses, strains and races for the finish line. With all the saints that have gone before us in the stands of heaven cheering us on, we look to run past that line and into the arms of Jesus, the one who has gone before. And so in this last week of our series on Adventurous Faith we make one last claim:

Adventurous Faith Wins the Prize

Such a statement begs two questions; what is the prize, and how do we win it? To answer those questions we are going to look at one of Jesus' most troubling parables. Actually, I find most of the parables of Jesus troubling, but this one especially. One of the privileges you grant me as one of your pastors is the time to reflect on the scriptures each week. That is an amazing gift. This week I have been especially helped by the work of an amazing man called Kenneth Bailey, whose insights into this text, along with others, I will be drawing on. The parable begins in Luke 19, verse 12:

A nobleman went into a far country to receive for himself a kingdom and then return. Calling ten of his servants, he gave them ten minas, and said to them, 'Engage in business until I come.' But his citizens hated him and sent a delegation after him, saying, 'We do not want this man to reign over us.'
(Luke 19:12-15)

What can be lost to us in the set up of this parable is just how 'real life' it is. The Israelites were used to local leaders seeking power from Rome. In 40BC Herod the Great traveled to Alexandria in Egypt and then on to Rome to lobby the Roman Senate to crown him the ruler of Judea. It happened again around forty years later when Herod Antipas sought the

same crown. Antipas traveled to Rome to seek a kingdom. Jesus says 'a nobleman went into a far country to receive for himself a kingdom and then return.'

Here is where it gets uncomfortable. The nobleman in Jesus' story is not Herod the Great, or Herod Antipas – two rulers hated by the people for being collaborators with Rome. The nobleman in the story is Jesus.

Before he leaves for the far country the nobleman does something completely unexpected; he calls and then gives ten of his servants a mina as a gift. A mina was the equivalent of 100 days wages, not an inconsiderable sum.

This was a free gift from a generous master to his servants. The ten servants were given gifts that did not earn nor deserve.

He gives them no instructions except, 'Engage in business until I come.' He is saying, 'Get on with my work, with my resources.'

While the nobleman was away there would be a leadership vacuum of sorts. The nobleman's enemies would attempt to use his absence to dilute his power and persecute and perhaps even kill his enemies.

The nobleman was effectively saying to the ten servants that during his absence they had the opportunity to honor him with how they used his gift. But it would take courage and commitment. In the story, the nobleman was effectively saying:

Once I return, having received kingly power, it will be easy to declare yourself publicly to be my loyal servants. I am more interested in how you conduct yourselves when I am absent and have to pay a high price to openly identify yourself with me.
(Kenneth Bailey)

In Jesus' story, opposition to the nobleman and his servants is real. They hated the nobleman and were prepared to do everything to stop him ruling over them. Literally translated, they said:

We do not want this @\$%& (expletive deleted) ruling over us.

As we step through this parable I am going to make some observations along the way.

One, we live in the time in between; the time in between the first and second coming of Christ. Jesus, our master, has left us his servants with a commission and with a gift.

He says to us, go and make disciples – engage in the business of the kingdom until I return.

He gives to us the Holy Spirit which manifests in various gifts. Every one of Jesus' followers has been given a mina – gifts in the form of our time, talents and money from the master – which he wants us to put to use for his honor.

Two, in this time in between we will face opposition from Jesus' enemies. We live in a time when our culture says of God, 'we don't want this (expletive deleted) to rule over us! We are masters of our own lives, the kings and queens of our own worlds.'

This week the 2011 census figures were released. For the first time, 'no religion' was the second most popular response, overtaking Anglicanism and just behind Catholicism. In many places in Australia, 'no religion' is the most popular. It is also the fastest growing category.

Here is a timeline graph that shows the startling changes in our nation.

In 2006, 3.7 million Australians said they had no religion. In 2011, it was 4.8 million. There are 8.5 million Australians of either no faith, or non-Christian faith. Only 49% of people aged 25-34 identified as Christian. For probably 12 million of the 13 million Australian who identify as Christian, their faith is simply a cultural or family memory. If I am right, there are 20

million fellow citizens who desperately need to hear the Good News of God's grace. The mission field is white for harvest and is just outside those windows.

We live in a culture that in many ways is not just ambivalent about God, but is anti-God. People don't want that (expletive deleted) ruling over them!

Jesus has commissioned us, gifted us and is watching us to whether we will engage in kingdom business until he returns in a time and a culture that has turned its back on God, and yet desperately needs the God it ignores and rejects. We will be held accountable for our actions in this time in between. The fact is that when Jesus returns in glory the bible says that every knee will bow in worship. What Jesus wants to know is this; will we, his servants, bow our knees before he returns?

Let's read on:

When he returned, having received the kingdom, he ordered these servants to whom he had given the money to be called to him, that he might know what they had gained by doing business. The first came before him, saying, 'Lord, your mina has made ten minas more.' And he said to him, 'Well done, good servant! Because you have been faithful in a very little, you shall have authority over ten cities.' And the second came, saying, 'Lord, your mina has made five minas.' And he said to him, 'And you are to be over five cities.'
(Luke 19:16-19)

The nobleman returns crowned as a triumphant king. He calls the ten servants together as he wants to know how much business has been transacted in his absence; how loyal they had been, how obedient they had been...how faithful they had been?

The response of the first and second servant is telling. They both say, 'Your mina has produced ten or five mina's more.' The servants are very clear; the gifts they have received from the nobleman are on loan to them. It's the master's money! They do not possess the master's resources; they steward them. More than that, it is the master's gifts that produce a return. Kenneth Bailey says the servants are effectively saying to the nobleman:

'Your gifts produced the fruit of our efforts.'

It is not the hard work or the concerted effort of the servants that have produced a return. It is the gift of the master that has produced a five and ten fold harvest.

A really important observation to make at this point is that the master commends the servant not for being successful, which they had been, but for being faithful. In fact when it came to measuring, one had been more successful than the other – producing ten minas as against five. But this was of secondary importance to the master. What was important was that in his absence, both servants had honored him by using the gifts he had given them – even in the face of possible opposition from the master's enemies.

The master rewards both servants, not with more privilege, but with more responsibility. They will share in the master's rule in proportion to what they produced with master's gifts – one to rule ten cities, the other five.

A couple of observations:

One, Jesus will come again. He will return as a king in glory. He will come crowned with majesty and splendor. What a great and glorious day that will be!

Two, on that day those who are called his servants will be called to give an account. In a culture that scorned and dismissed the king, did we engage in kingdom business? Did we take the great commission seriously? Did the gifts God gave us and our efforts produce fruit that pleases God?

Everything we enjoy, from the air we breathe, to the house we live in, to the money in our bank accounts or super funds, is a gift from God. The question is whether we will be a faithful servant with these gifts.

All of us in this room have financial resources – from the poorest of to the richest. All of us have the opportunity to honor the master with the financial resources he has given us by using them for kingdom purposes.

Here at Newlife we offer four ways you can invest the financial resources God has given you for kingdom purposes. There are four giving buckets if you like, the details of which are on the flyer you got with your newsletter today.

The red bucket is Tithes. The Old Testament affirms and Jesus confirms that we should honor God with the first and best of our income. A tithe is simply an offering to the work of God through the church that is one tenth, or ten percent of the income that God has blessed us with. This should be the minimum giving standard for Christian believers. Many of you, like Sue and me, have discovered the liberating joy of giving God the first and best of your income. The first think that comes out of our bank account each month after my pay is our tithe to the church. Every person and family who calls Newlife home should be giving a tithe proportional to their income.

Here is an amazing thing. This year our budgeted tithes income is \$720,000. Fantastic! But, if every person who attended church each week actually gave the full 10% of their income as a tithe – their first and best to God – then our tithes income would be \$2.1 million. If every person who is on our pastoral list – who calls Newlife their church home – gave their full tithe, then the amount of resources available would be \$4million. Wow!

In addition to Tithes, God may well call you to give an offering to one or more of the other three ‘buckets’. These are our offerings – our sacrificial giving over and above our tithes.

The blue bucket is Time to Build. Time to Build is the vision that God has laid on our heart to steward this property that God has given us. It’s a scary vision. It’s stretching us in every way possible, including financially. Around 30% of us who call Newlife home have made a pledge or gift to Time to Build, which is fantastic. If you are in the 70% who haven’t pledged or given, be open to the possibility that God may well challenge you to do so. Or maybe God is calling you to increase your commitment?

The yellow bucket is Newlife Care. Newlife Care is our care services are – Gold Coast people helping Gold Coast people in need. Newlife Care is funded by the Op Shop and some counseling fees and in large part through donations from people in our church. Like most charities, Newlife Care has been doing it tough the last couple of years. Demand for services has gone through the roof at the same time that income has plummeted. I want to be up front with you. Newlife Care needs your help. We need to raise \$25,000 through our annual appeal to ensure Newlife Care’s ongoing services. We have had no problems raising that in the past. So far, with a week of our appeal to go, we are a long way short. In your newsletter today there is a giving envelope. You can make tax deductible gifts with this envelope or at the Newlife Care desk in the courtyard today.

The green bucket is our Acts 1:8 mission projects. In Acts 1:8 Jesus promised us that we would be his witnesses in Jerusalem, in Judea, in Samaria and to the ends of the world. Our mission mandate is local, regional, national and international. Through Acts 1:8 mission projects you have built a house for a hospital in the Solomon Islands, you sponsor 70 children through school in Thailand and Cambodia, help build a campsite in Bosnia and provide fresh water in Haiti. These are just a few of the projects. Through Acts 1:8 you have given over \$100,000 to help establish our Pac Pines campus. From time to time we let you know about Acts 1:8 mission projects you can support.

Let me be really direct. I believe that the biblical standard that God calls each of his servants to is first to give their full tithe. Then, each of us should be open to God’s call to sacrificially give an offering to one or more of the other buckets – Time to Build, Newlife Care or Acts 1:8.

God requires total, not partial allegiance from his servants. God doesn’t want our leftovers; he wants our first and our best. CS Lewis out it this way:

God doesn’t want something from us. He simply wants us.
(CS Lewis)

A third and final observation about this section; we will be rewarded in proportion to our fruitfulness. And our reward will not be greater gifts, but greater responsibility. The faithful servants weren't rewarded with more money, but the opportunity to serve the master even more by ruling cities. God does not bless us so that we can position ourselves for more blessing. Contrary to what some churches teach, God is not a 'get rich quick scheme'. We are blessed to be a blessing. And as we use the gifts God has given us to bless others, we will be blessed, and with that blessing will come more responsibility more opportunities and so a righteous cycle continues.

Let's read on:

Then another came, saying, 'Lord, here is your mina, which I kept laid away in a handkerchief; for I was afraid of you, because you are a severe man. You take what you did not deposit, and reap what you did not sow.' He said to him, 'I will condemn you with your own words, you wicked servant! You knew that I was a severe man, taking what I did not deposit and reaping what I did not sow? Why then did you not put my money in the bank, and at my coming I might have collected it with interest?'

(Luke 19:20-23)

At first glance, this part of the story is really troubling. While the master is away, the third servant hides the mina – he doesn't get on with business. We don't know why – he was apathetic, he was fearful of the master's enemies – it doesn't really matter.

What we do know is that while he doesn't have anything to show, he does have an excuse. He says to the master, 'I was scared of you! You are a hard man! You take what you want without asking! What if I lost your mina, or invested it and the investment went south.'

Is this really an accurate picture of the master, and by extension, of Jesus? Of course not!

In the parable the master responds not with an admission, but with a rhetorical question – the importance is critical.

'You knew me as a hard man? Really? That's who you think I am? You've got to be joking – right?'

Have you ever been confronted by someone else's assessment of your character that is completely wrong? That is what is happening here.

The unfaithful servant looks at the master through unfaithful eyes and sees a distorted image.

The master says:

'I will leave you with your self-created, distorted picture of my nature. In fact, it is with that self-created image of me that I will judge you – I will judge you by your own distorted standards.'

Time for a couple of observations:

One, this parable is not saying that God is like a hard master who takes what is not his, who reaps but does not sow.

Two, and this is really important, this parable is saying that the way we choose to live our life influences how we see and relate to God.

The servant's unfaithfulness produced a twisted vision of the master.

This is really important. The way we live influences how we see God. If we live a greedy life, to justify our actions, we will start to see God as in some ways greedy. If we live a life holding on to hurts and failing to forgive, we will start to see God as one who withholds forgiveness. The list goes on. The Psalmist says it far better than me:

With the merciful you show yourself merciful; with the blameless man you show yourself blameless; with the purified you show yourself pure; and with the crooked you make yourself seem tortuous.
(Psalm 18:25-26)

The truth of this psalm and this parable reinforces for me my desperate need for a daily revelation of the character of God. Left to my own devices I start to create God in my image. I need to break the spell. And the spell can only be broken when my eyes, my heart, my life is captivated by the Cross. Daily my vision has to be filled by the Cross. The Cross tells me what God is like – that God is gracious, that God is merciful, that God is faithful, that God is just, that God is slow to anger, that God is long-suffering, that God is holy, that God ...is...Love!

Let me put it another way; my unfaithful heart and life will only be healed when I gaze on and yield my life to a faithful God.

Three, as the scriptures say, the human heart is deceitful above all things. The unfaithful servant had convinced himself, and was trying to convince the master that in hiding his mina in a hanky he was being prudent and wise, when all along he was simply being greedy. He was hoarding the master's gift for himself.

How many of us are hanky hiders? We take what God has given us, wrap it in a hanky and protect it at all costs. The moment we wrap up and seek to protect at all costs God's gifts they become an idol to us as dangerous as the golden calf was to ancient Israel.

Let's finish the passage:

And he said to those who stood by, 'Take the mina from him, and give it to the one who has the ten minas.' And they said to him, 'Lord, he has ten minas!' 'I tell you that to everyone who has, more will be given, but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. But as for these enemies of mine, who did not want me to reign over them, bring them here and slaughter them before me.'
(Luke 19:24-27)

The resources of the unfaithful servant are taken away and given to faithful servant.

The enemies of the master are judged and condemned to death.

Some more observations:

One, if we consistently refuse to use the gifts and resources that God has blessed us with to honor him, then we should expect that at some point God will reallocate those resources to someone who will. If as a church, we don't steward faithfully this property, the amazing people resources we have – if we fail to give our lives away for the cause of the gospel – then we should not be surprised that one day God might take what we have and give it to another group who will.

You see, at the end of the day, it's not about us. It is about God and his kingdom.

Two, there will be a final judgment. Those who willfully reject God will be condemned by their choice and spend eternity separated from God. This awful, terrible reality reminds us again of the urgency of the commission God has given us. He tells us, 'Get on with the business of the kingdom!'

We are nearly finished. Let me summarize the message of this parable, as best we can discern it, using the words of Kenneth Bailey:

In the parable the master challenges his servants to live boldly and publicly as his servants, using his resources, unafraid of his enemies, confident in the future as his future.
(Kenneth Bailey)

Adventurous Faith wins the prize.

What is the prize?

The prize is the presence of the master – the presence of Jesus. What more do we need? What else is there?

How do we win it?

We run the race he marked out for us, we strain for the finish line, we use his gifts – time, talents and money - and our efforts to serve him, we run and sprint and reach for the finish line of this mortal life with the saints that have gone before us in heaven's grandstands cheering us on. And as we break the tape he will be there to meet us. These are the words that I pray will greet me; 'Well done good and faithful servant!'

As we finish this series, God's charge to you is this:

Strip down, start running—and never quit! No extra spiritual fat, no parasitic sins. Keep your eyes on Jesus, who both began and finished this race we're in.

(The Message)