

“Do You Like Movies with Unhappy Endings?”

Matthew 25:14-30

Preached by Dr. Robert F. Browning, Pastor
Smoke Rise Baptist Church
Stone Mountain, Georgia
November 9, 2003

Do you like movies with unhappy endings? I don't. I struggle when the hero gets killed or the bad guys win. I'm a "happy end to the story" kind of guy.

Maybe that's why I struggle with this parable. It certainly doesn't have a happy ending. I've never seen a court martial that did and that's what happened to the third servant in this story. He was publicly humiliated, stripped of his medals and exiled. Where's the grace? What happened to second chances? Why so hard on this man?

What in heaven's name did he do? Did he steal something, lie under oath, abuse a child or kill an innocent person? What would merit the severe punishment he received?

When we discover this, I think we discover the meaning of the parable and the reason Jesus told it. For many, including C. H. Dodd, believe the whole attention of the parable concentrates on the third servant.

So, what crime did he commit? He wasted an opportunity to do something good. He was given everything he needed to make an impact and refused to do it.

You know the story, don't you? Before leaving on a long journey, a businessman called in three servants. He gave each a substantial, though not equal, amount of money. He wanted them to multiply it while he was gone, which the first two servants did. However, the third servant dug a hole and placed the money there for safe keeping. Upon the return of the businessman, the third servant retrieved the money and gave it back to his employer. He gave back all of it, not a penny was missing.

To say the least, the businessman was not pleased. He wasn't even mildly disappointed. Evidently, he was furious. Listen to his reaction.

“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 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. And throw that worthless servant outside into the darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” Matthew 25:26-30.

Do you struggle with this response? I do. Appears to me to be a case of overkill. What would he have done with the poor fella if he had stolen some of the money or lost all of it? I guess the only thing left would have been to kill him, which by the way, was exactly what happened in Luke's version of this parable. If Matthew's slant bothers you, don't read Luke's. You really will be alarmed.

Well, back to the question. Why? Why was the third servant in this parable treated so harshly? The only thing I can figure out is that he wasted an opportunity to do something good.

What does this tell us about how Jesus felt about wasted potential? If Jesus was speaking for God, and I believe he was, what does it tell us about what upsets God?

I become amused and sometimes angry over hearing preachers tell me what upsets God. I suppose you have noticed they never mention their weaknesses or at least none they are willing to confess.

In all my years of listening to preachers, I don't think I've heard one mention what I think is the essence of this parable. According to this parable, it appears to me that what upsets God most is wasted potential. He gets very frustrated with people that have been loaded down with talents, skills, abilities, resources and opportunities to do good that ignore what they have been given or refuse to use them. This really irritates Him.

Why? Because the world desperately needs what blessed people have to offer. His world is filled with people that are lonely, sick, hungry, homeless, uneducated, frightened, confused and anxious and need someone to reach out to them. When He sees gifted people that have so much to offer ignoring and wasting their opportunities to make a difference, it grieves Him.

As a parent, what frustrates you the most about your children? I would be willing to say that it is their unwillingness to live up to their potential. Children that ignore their talents and abilities and squander opportunities to achieve their potential fluster parents beyond words. You want to shake them and wake them up. You want to show them all they are missing and the difference it could make in their own life as well as others.

Now, maybe you understand God better. Perhaps you see why Jesus told this parable. It was not meant to condemn people but wake and stir them up.

Let me draw your attention back to this parable. Why do you think this man dug a hole in the ground and placed the businessman's money there? One reason was because the Talmud, the Jewish holy book that interpreted the Law instructed him to do this. "Money can only be guarded by placing it in the earth," it stated.

This was a good man. He was a religious man who was trying to follow the teaching of his church. And yet, he was court martialed.

So what's the message for us? We need to take an inventory of what we have been given, time, talents, resources and opportunities. God is not the least bit interested in us hoarding them until He returns so that we can give them back to Him. He wants us to be bold and creative and use them to make the world a better place.

This is why our new dream at Smoke Rise is "to give ourselves away." God has so richly blessed us individually and collectively so that we can be a blessing to others. He has invested much in us and expects us to use it wisely to make a difference in His world.

This morning, I challenge you to take an inventory of your talents, skills, abilities and resources and match them with someone in need. If you are a good cook, take a dish to a sick neighbor. If you can drive a car, go to the grocery for someone that cannot. If you have a camera, take some pictures of our beautiful fall foliage or holiday decorations and take them to some shut-ins. If you are a handyman, repair some things broken in a senior adult's home. If you have a hammer, a saw, a screw driver or a paint brush, volunteer to build a Habitat for Humanity home. If you can answer a phone, go to the local co-ops and serve as a receptionist. If you can rock a baby, help Nancy in the nursery. If you can read and write, teach English as a second language one night a week. If you can type or talk, go to the Gwinnett Clinic and help process patients that need medical attention but have no insurance.

A little over a week ago, our church said goodbye to one of her finest members, Buren Smith. What an outpouring of love I witnessed at the funeral home during his visitation and then at the funeral the next day. Why did we love and appreciate Buren so much? You know the answer. Buren loved all of us, young and old alike, and demonstrated it through many deeds of kindness and generosity. Even on Monday before his accident on Tuesday, he, Pat and Maxine Allshouse went to Suwanee to visit Ken Haralson. Visiting shut-ins, checking on the Kurdish refugees, raising money for the Heart of Atlanta, coordinating volunteer missionaries for the Atlanta Baptist Association, meeting his Sunday School class for lunch, chaperoning our children at summer camps or filling in for staff members when they were away were only a few of the things that Buren did.

Buren loved us with his hands, feet, gracious smile and encouraging words as well as his heart, didn't he? He was a good steward of the gifts God so generously bestowed upon him. He showed us how to "give ourselves away." I have no doubt that Buren was embraced by our Lord last Monday morning and heard those precious words, "Well done thou good and faithful servant." I hope all of us will hear these affirming words when our journey is over, too.

