Luke Lesson 77 (2021)

**THE PRINCIPLE OF GOD’S REWARDS IN HEAVEN**

Luke 19:11-27

Key Verse: 19:26

“He replied, ‘I tell you that to everyone who has, more will be given, but as for the one who has nothing, even what they have will be taken away.’”

Studying, reading, and meditating on God’s words is a joyous experience and an excellent guide for Christian disciples (Psalm 1). Preparing a weekly sermon is a great blessing for me. Yet, I must confess that it’s a little more complicated than just meditating on God’s words. One of the most challenging parts of message preparation is to find a proper title. And I cannot find a suitable title unless I understand what God seems to tell us through the passage. You will know why I put today’s sermon title as “The Principle of God’s Rewards in Heaven.” The Parable of the Ten Minas in today’s passage is similar to the Parable of the Talents in Matthew’s account (Mt. 25:14-30). They are two distinctive parables but share the same point: God’s rewards for us in heaven depend on our faithfulness on earth.

Verse 11 explains why Jesus had to speak the parable. Look at verse 11. “While they were listening to this, he went on to tell them a parable, because he was near Jerusalem and the people thought that the kingdom of God was going to appear at once.” In the preceding passage (19:1-10), as Jesus passed through Jericho, he invited himself to the house of Zacchaeus, the notorious chief tax collector. He blessed Zaccheus’ sincere repentance and declared by saying, “Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the Lost.” Since it was close to the Jewish Passover Feast, many pilgrims traveled along with Jesus. They expected that when Jesus arrived at Jerusalem, he could overturn the Roman government, declare his kingship, and make Jerusalem the capital of the new world order. Being aware of people’s growing expectations of him, Jesus spoke the parable to correct their mistaken idea of the immediate coming of God’s kingdom.

Look at verse 12. “He said: ‘A man of noble birth went to a distant country to have himself appointed king and then to return.’” The phrase “a man of noble birth” refers to Jesus himself. When he said that a man of noble birth went to a distant country to have himself appointed king and then return, he referred to his upcoming death, resurrection, ascension, and glorious second coming. People in the Old Testament believed in the Messiah's coming, yet they were not aware that there would be the first coming and the second coming of the Messiah. Now, Jesus revealed that God had a different timeline for his redemptive work and that his messianic work in the first coming was to offer himself as a ransom for our sins. And it would be at his second coming that he will be the judge and ruler of the world (Lk. 21:27). After all, since his second coming would not be immediate but delay over a long period, his followers should know how to prepare for his second coming.

Look at verse 13. “So he called ten of his servants and gave them ten minas. ‘Put this money to work,’ he said, ‘until I come back.’” Here, the ten servants refer to the followers of Jesus throughout the ages who accepted Christ as their Savior and Lord. They were blessed people, chosen by God as a royal priesthood and a holy nation (1 Peter 2:9). Each servant in the parable received the same amount, a mina or a pound (KJV), equal to 100 drachmas, worth about three months' wages. The master told them, “Put this money to work until I come back.” The Phrase “put this money to work” means to do business or trade. The master gave a small amount of money to them because he wanted to see which of his servants would be worthy of greater responsibility in his coming kingdom.

Look at verses 14 and 15a. “But his subjects hated him and sent a delegation after him to say, ‘We don’t want this man to be our king. He was made king, however, and returned home.” Here, the subjects who hated the nobleman refer to the Jewish religious leaders, including the Pharisees, teachers of the law, the chief priests, and members of the Sanhedrin. Many Bible scholars think that this parable is loosely connected to a historical reality known to the people of Judea. Archelaus was one of three sons of King Herod the Great. Since Israel was under the rule of the Roman Empire, Archelaus went to Rome to have himself officially appointed king. But the citizens in Judea hated him because of his cruelty and sent a delegation to appeal to Caesar not to make him their ruler. By way of compromise, however, Archelaus received the right to rule in Judea but not to use the title of king. Instead, he was called Herod the Tetrarch.

The fact of the matter is that Jesus was hated too. His enemies included the Pharisees, the teachers of the law, the Sadducees, the high priests, and the Sanhedrin members. They handed Jesus over to the Romans to be executed. People asked Pilate, the Roman governor, to release Barabbas and crucify Jesus. Sorry to say that most of the Jews hated Jesus. Jesus was killed by the hand of man. Yet, he would come back to life, ascended into heaven, and in God’s time, he will return to earth as the King of kings and the Lord of lords. It seems that Jesus used the familiar historical reality as the background for his point that he will come back.

So what did the king do when he returned? Look at verse 15b. “Then he sent for the servants to whom he had given the money, in order to find out what they had gained with it.” It’s interesting to see that the returned king didn’t first punish his rebellious citizens who hated him. Instead, he sent for his servants to whom he had given the money to find out what they had gained with it (15). It indicates that God’s judgment starts from within the household of God (1 Peter 4:17-18). However, the focus of the parable is to show how the servants should prepare themselves for the coming of their king.

Look at verses 16-19. “The first one came and said, ‘Sir, your mina has earned ten more.’ ‘Well done, my good servant!’ his master replied. ‘Because you have been trustworthy in a very small matter, take charge of ten cities.’ The second came and said, ‘Sir, your mina has earned five more.’ His master answered, ‘You take charge of five cities.’” The king was pleased with these two servants who obeyed his instructions wholeheartedly by putting their money to work. Even though it might have been tough for them to do, they did their best out of their love and gratitude toward their master.

Jesus didn’t say to the servant who earned ten minas more, *“I am glad that you made me rich!”* Instead, he said, “Well done, my good servant! Because you have been trustworthy in a very small matter, take charge of ten more.” The master was pleased by the spiritual quality of their trustworthiness. The king rewarded them accordingly by putting them in charge of more significant responsibilities in his kingdom, based on the quality of their trustworthiness.

When you say that someone is trustworthy, it means that they are reliable, honest, and truthful. That’s probably the highest recognition from God. Someone might be intelligent, talented, and hardworking. But if that person is not trustworthy, they would not be assigned to a responsible position? Apostle Paul said in 1 Corinthians 4:2, “Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful.” Trustworthiness is such an essential quality that God requires from all his servants.

We are humans who are not perfect and make mistakes. Nobody is born trustworthy. So how can we become trustworthy? We need self-discipline. Since the pandemic restriction is eased in recent days, I see many young and older people exercising in the gyms. They try to build their muscles and improve their health through self-discipline. Apostle Paul said to this spiritual son, Timothy, “Physical training is good, but training for godliness is much better, promising benefits in this life and in the life to come.” (1 Tim. 4:8-NLT) I agree with Paul. Trustworthiness is the fruit of the Holy Spirit in us through our spiritual struggle and self-discipline.

Look at verses 20-23. “Then another servant came and said, ‘Sir, here is your mina; I have kept it laid away in a piece of cloth. I was afraid of you, because you are a hard man. You take out what you did not put in and reap what you did not sow.’ ‘His master replied, ‘I will judge you by your own words, you wicked servant! You knew, did you, that I am a hard man, taking out what I did not put in, and reaping what I did not sow? Why then didn’t you put my money on deposit, so that when I came back, I could have collected it with interest?’” The third servant was displeasing to the master. He was called wicked. When we carefully analyze his excuses, we see that he didn’t have a love and trust relationship with his master. He said, “I was afraid that you are a hard man.” He also blamed the master for his failure, saying, “You take out what you did not put in and reap what you did not sow.” He meant, *“You are too hard to please, Sir. So it’s all your fault that I didn’t do anything.”* Wow! He didn’t even take a minimum responsibility for his failure. He acted as if he were a victim. The king didn’t buy the wicked servant’s excuse.

Look at verse 24. “Then he said to those standing by, ‘Take his mina away from him and give it to the one who has ten minas.’ ‘Sir,’ they said, ‘he already has ten!’ It’s interesting to see that the king didn’t say, *“Okay, since you have at least kept one mina in the cloth, I will be generous to you. Take charge of one city, okay?”* No. He took the mina away from him and gave it to the one who had ten minas. Others who saw it protested, saying, “Sir, he already has ten!” They meant that the king was unfair, and he should be fair by distributing rewards fairly.

The point of Jesus in the parable is described in verse 26. “He replied, ‘I tell you that to everyone who has, more will be given, but as for the one who has nothing, even what they have will be taken away.” Here, Jesus declares that God’s reward for Christian disciples in heaven is not based on fairness but based on the level of our trustworthiness.

 We should pause here and think a little deeper. Of course, we are not saved by our good works. Faith is the only condition for our justification. So many Bible verses support it. For example, John 3:36 states, “Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God’s wrath remains on them.” Apostle Paul confirms it by saying in Ephesians 2:8-9, “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this is not from yourselves, is the gift of God – not by works, so that one can boast.” He also said in Romans 11:6, “And if by grace, then it cannot be based on works; if it were, grace would no longer be grace.” There is no confusion in the Bible about the justification by faith alone.

But we must not forget that while good works do not save us, God saved us so that we may do the good things in Christ Jesus. For example, Jesus said in Matthew 16:27, “For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father’s glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what they have done.” Also, after declaring our salvation based on God’s grace alone, Apostle Paul states that God saved us to do good works. He said in Ephesians 2:10, "For we are God’s masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do the good things he planned for us long ago.” (NLT) Our belief in Christ determines our entrance into heaven, but our behavior in Christ determines our reward in heaven. In other words, justification is God’s gift. But God’s reward in heaven is based on our work, on the level of our sanctification.

When Christ returns, he will evaluate and reward us based on what did on earth. 2 Corinthians 5:10 states, “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each of us may receive what is due us for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.” If we get a poor evaluation, we will be sorry forever. God’s reward for us in heaven is not the same. It depends on our faithfulness.

Look at verse 26 again. “He replied, ‘I tell you that to everyone who has, more will be given, but as for the one who has nothing, even what they have will be taken away.” Whenever I read this verse, I didn’t feel comfortable because I thought that God was unfair. A Christian friend once told me that he wouldn’t want to go there if there is inequality in heaven. His logic is that everybody who has believed in Jesus should be treated and rewarded equally in heaven. His idea is that the kingdom of God should be fair and just. I think that fairness and justice are essential characteristics of heaven. Yes, Jesus is our reward, our peace, joy, and strength. So we all have the same reward. But the Parable of the Ten Minas articulates otherwise.

By the way, should God be considered unfair when he rewards his trustworthy servants with more responsibility? I don’t think so. Instead, God is fair by rewarding his good and faithful servant with abundant blessings. In fact, God wants to motivate his children by promising great rewards. Of course, we should serve God and obey his command not just because of his rewards but because of our genuine love and respect for him. Yet, God also knows that we won’t be motivated to obey him wholeheartedly if everybody gets the same reward in heaven no matter what they have done on earth. So we find many promises of God’s rewards for his obedient and faithful servants in the Scripture. For example, God spoke to the people of Israel through Moses, “Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” (Exo. 19:5-6) Jesus spoke in heaven, “Look, I am coming soon! My reward is with me, and I will give to each person according to what they have done.” (Revelation 22:12)

Let me close my sermon. The Parable of the Ten Minas teaches that the basis of God’s rewards is our faithful obedience to God. Jesus spoke this parable to motivate us to obey his command wholeheartedly while waiting for his return. Some Christians think that serving God for the sake of God’s reward is not genuine.

So why should we be concerned about God’s reward? Of course, it makes a huge difference in our life as Christian disciples. In the early 1980s, I had a Bible student in Chicago who was enthusiastic about one-to-one Bible study. He wanted to study Genesis twice a week. I was very excited about this young man. But after a few weeks of Bible study, he told me that he didn’t want to study any longer. He said that he didn’t want to struggle too much after finding that Lot was saved anyway. I was disappointed and tried to change his mind to no avail. Based on today’s passage, his idea was that it's good enough if we could get into heaven. What difference does it make if we don’t get any rewards in heaven? *“I will go to heaven anyway. So what’s the big deal about the reward?”*

Of course, it’s our choice either to live like Abraham or to live like Lot. The outcome of Lot’s life was miserable. He became so paranoid that he could not sleep unless he were drunk. Although the Bible calls him a righteous man (2 Pet. 2:27), nobody admires him. And I don’t think he would be honored in heaven. When we don’t care about God’s reward in heaven, we cannot live a healthy Christian life. That’s why Jesus spoke this parable, distinguishing between the good and faithful servants and the wicked servant. The faithful servants were greatly honored, while the wicked servant was shamed.

That’s why Paul encouraged early Christians to run like Olympians. He said in 1 Corinthians 9:24, “Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize.” In the Olympics, only one person wins the prize. But the beautiful thing about the spiritual race is that every Christian can win the award.

We are also called to be God’s stewards, entrusted with the gospel truth, the mysteries God has revealed to us. (12; 1 Cor. 4:1) The gospel is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes. All we need to do is distribute this gospel truth faithfully. And the gospel will work mightily in the lives of those who are open to it. But if we hide it in the piece of cloth with any good excuse, we won’t be able to avoid God’s poor evaluation and be shamed. Seeking God’s reward is not selfish. If we don’t care about God’s reward, even if we say and think that we love God genuinely, we won’t be able to remain faithful to the end. God rewards those who earnestly seek him (Heb. 11:6b). If we don’t have enough motivation to run the race, we will be shamed and not honored. There will be a great award ceremony when Jesus comes again. Each of us will receive a different award. We don’t want to be ashamed when Jesus comes again. We want Jesus to recognize us, saying, “Well done, my good servant! Because you have been trustworthy in a very small matter, take charge of ten cities!” Let us run the race of our faith with perseverance and hope, putting one mina into work until the final day. God bless you!