

“In the Interim”

Introduction: If you had the chance to be with us last Sunday you would have been able to meet a pastor named Cliff Hersey who was visiting with his wife Sue. Cliff, as he was introduced, will be serving as your interim minister, after my departure on January 1. The word interim means temporary or provisional. It denotes a time period between two events, a period which will be in place until something permanent is established. That something permanent will be the finding and hiring of a new, “settled” pastor.

I mention all of that because it’s important to recognize that even though the interim period is temporary or provisional, it’s not intended to be a time when a congregation simply kicks back, puts its feet up, and watches the search committee do its thing! Rather, under the guidance of the interim pastor, this period is to be used to help a congregation transition from one settled pastor to another, as well as enabling them to continue to minister in Christ’s name, loving God and neighbor.

Now, there are interim periods that individual congregations experience, but the NT also reveals an interim period in which every Christian lives, and that is the period between the first and second comings of Jesus. The parable before us, which Jesus spun just before leaving Jericho, is one such text. In it, King Jesus encourages his servants to be good stewards while they await his return. What might that look like for us, in the time and place we’ve been planted?

I. The Context

A. The text begins,

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.

What those around Jesus had been listening to was his explanation of the remarkable event which had just taken place at the home of the chief tax collector, Zacchaeus. Zacchaeus, who had been essentially operating a program of extortion as he collected taxes from his Jewish countrymen on behalf of the Romans, had felt so loved by Jesus that his life had been turned around. He had given half of his possessions to the poor and was making plans to pay back 4x to those whom he had cheated. Jesus declared that salvation had come to his house. All of this followed, you may remember, the healing by Jesus of the blind beggar named Bartimaeus. After his eyes had been opened, he fell into step with Jesus, experiencing salvation on more than one level.

B. Given these kinds of healings, and knowing that Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem, the crowd evidently began to reason that once Jesus’ saving activity was extended to the capital city, the kingdom of God would appear in its fullness. By this, most understood or anticipated this would involve Jesus, as Messiah, seizing control of the government, setting the Jewish nation free from its Roman oppressors, and setting up the rule of God on earth. Because this view vastly misunderstood what Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem to do, as well of the timing that would be involved, Jesus sought to reorient their expectations by means of a parable. It is certainly one that has a lot of sharp edges! But, it is certainly worth trying to surface its meaning.

## II. The Players

A. The major players in this parable are a man of noble birth heading off to be appointed a king, servants of his who he put in charge of some of his funds to manage while he was away, and subjects who didn't want this man to be king in the first place. There is an interesting historical association with the king to be and his unhappy subjects which would've grabbed the attention of Jesus' listeners. That is, when Herod the Great (who ruled over all of Palestine on behalf of the Roman Empire) died in 4 BC, his will designated that his rule be divided among three sons, a division which the Roman overlords needed to ratify. One of the sons, Archelaus, decided to travel to Rome to plead his case with the authorities. A delegation of 50 Jewish leaders followed him, intending to plead the opposite – they hated him and did not want him to rule! Well, Archelaus was made ruler and when they all arrived back home, the real action of the parable begins...

B. ...which is the assessment of the servants' stewardship. What's worth noting at the outset is the trust the king placed in his servants. He gave them each the equivalent of three months' wages, and let them invest as they saw fit. In some sense, this was also something of a test with a relatively small amount. Would they prove faithful in their stewarding? Jesus highlights three servants. The first two did well, the third not so much. The first two both made a profit, and although one made more than the other, both are affirmed as having been good stewards and both were given greater and more responsibility as a result.

C. The third servant struggled. He decided not to invest his mina in any way and instead wrapped it up in a piece of cloth to protect it and perhaps to keep him from losing it. In his conversation with the king as to why he didn't bother to use in some way what he'd been given, what comes through is that this servant was so concerned with his performance, so afraid of failing, so wrapped up in what the king certainly had the power to do, that he didn't understand the actual graciousness of the king. So, he did nothing. And, in doing nothing, he loses his gift altogether. That can happen, Jesus explains in the parable. If we don't use what we have, either mentally or physically, we can lose it.

D. The parable ends with one of those "sharp edges," the execution, in front of the king, of the subjects – the religious leaders – who opposed the kingship of Jesus. On the one hand, this was the reality of ancient politics – it was not uncommon for opponents of a ruler to be killed before his presence – and this ugly scene would've made sense to Jesus' original audience, and conveyed the seriousness of their position. On the other hand, its harshness still serves as a warning for modern readers: for those who oppose and reject Jesus, when the end comes it will not end well.

## III. Investing for the King

A. I think this parable begins to meet us as we understand ourselves to be servants of King Jesus, awaiting, in this broad interim period, his return. He doesn't call us to simply sit around as forgiven sinners, waiting for what comes next, but to understand ourselves, as the apostle Paul puts it in his Corinthian correspondence, "as those entrusted with the mysteries God has revealed." Those who have been given a trust, Paul goes on to say, must prove faithful (1Cor. 4:2-3). Have we been so? Well, what has God given us that has been revealed?

B. As Paul spells it out in his letters, we've been given Jesus, and what God has revealed in Jesus is that through his life, it is possible to know God. And that through his death and resurrection, it is possible to be in right relationship with this God. And that through his ascension and gifting of the Spirit, we can have God's empowering and guiding presence dwelling within us as he uses us to help make all things new, to be lights in a dark place. Everything God has given us, therefore, our time, our talents, our treasure, is to be used to care for and share this good news in the interim period in which we live.

So, for example, God has given many of us children – are we teaching them about Jesus? God has given us places to live and work – are we exemplifying Christian love to our neighbors in those places, not calling people who disagree with us trash which must be taken out, but listening to and loving those who think differently than we do? God has given each of us talents, unique giftings – are we using them to strengthen the mission and outreach of the church?

C. What I find encouraging in these examples Jesus highlights from the group of servants, is that there is not one example of an investment tried but gone bad. Rather, when we invest what God has given us for the purpose of holding up the Kingdom of God, we cannot fail because all God asks us to do is to be faithful with what we have; he will do the rest, for the return is his business.

We see this illustrated throughout the Bible.

1. In a word God speaks to us through the prophet Isaiah, God says: "My word will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it" (Isa. 55:11). God has entrusted us with spreading his word; the return is his job.

2. Or, in the church in Corinth, Paul writes how he and his companion Apollos thought about their ministry using a simple gardening metaphor: "I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow" (1Cor. 3:6). Meaning that Paul had shared the essence of the good news, a local fellow named Apollos had continued nurturing the citizens in the word that Paul had begun, and that God had taken the evangelizing and discipling talents of these two men and by his power, was bringing about a fruitful result.

3. The only failure we see comes as a result of fear: "I was afraid of you," the third servant confessed, "because you are a hard man." But, was that really true? The first two servants found the King to be most generous! Even Zacchaeus discovered that the Lord had not come to scold him but to love him, and in light of that fact, he stopped taking and began to give.

Maybe, when fear begins to creep into our lives and threaten our ability to be faithful with what God has entrusted to us, then learning about and reflecting on the true character of the King might be a good place to start. The King is hard only on those who refuse to use what he has graciously given them.

In this interim period in which we find ourselves, not just in our church but also in our world, in which much seems broken beyond repair, there is much to do. Above all, God has entrusted us with the good news concerning his Son, the King. May we share it in a way that is worthy of His trust, in a way that is life giving, trusting that when this interim period is over, all will be well.