

“Sloth or Diligence?”

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Sinning like a Christian: The Good News series

“Whatever!” “I don’t care!” “Whatever!” The Greek word for “sloth” actually translates to “no care.” We might also use the word “apathy” to describe this one of the seven deadly sins. Again, the deadly part has to do with the fact that all of these behaviors drive us away from God and from others. And certainly when we don’t care, there’s not a lot of connection there.

Are we walking around with a “no care” attitude, or is it easy for others to see and know that we’re followers of Jesus? I’m not suggesting that we get puffed up with pride about it, but we’re living in a time when our faith life is so privatized that sometimes we don’t do anything or say anything about God’s place and priority in our lives. That seems to go against who God calls us to be. William White describes sloth as “disconnecting ourselves from the rest of creation, from the rest of the human family.”

Looking at this parable that Jesus tells, it’s important to note a couple of things. A talent, in Jesus’ time, was a measure of weight, then it became a measure of coinage. The master left those slaves with a lot of money. A denarius was a normal wage for a day laborer. One talent was equal to about 6,000 denarii – about 15 years’ wages for a day laborer. So for these servants, who had nothing, the master’s trust is enormous!

So, I’ll be honest, I sympathize with the one-talent servant. I’d be scared out of my mind entrusted with so much money. He’d probably never even thought of having that much. In Jewish culture, burying money was a responsible way to safeguard valuables. The other part, though, is that Jewish teaching said anyone who buries money put in their care is no longer responsible for its safety. He plays it safe, but by burying it, there’s no potential for growth.

So, this parable is tough: is the servant being cautious or just shirking responsibility for what he’s been given? The master doesn’t give any instructions for what to do. He just leaves them with the responsibility and leaves – quite a risk to take! Two of them do something to earn more, and the other doesn’t. When the master returns, this one-talent servant is thrown out without apology.

We have to get past the money part of this parable. Yes, Jesus uses money as the object, but the implications go far beyond that. You might know this story as the Parable of the Talents, but it’s also called the Parable of the Faithful and Unfaithful Servants. Jesus is talking about our life of faith and discipleship.

There is Good News here, though I think it can be hard to see because we get so focused on that poor one-talent servant. The message of grace comes through in the

master's abundant giving. He gives these servants generous gifts. But with grace comes responsibility and accountability. He expects something from them.

We can celebrate God's grace all the time. We can sing about it and talk about it, but if I claim God's grace for myself, I have to live it. The judgment from God is that we miss out on serving and working with God and understanding the joy of sharing grace.

We have a responsibility to serve God with our God-given gifts. They are a trust from God, and we're given the opportunity to use them to honor God. We love and serve a living, giving God who created the world and who desires a relationship with us so much that God risked everything for us in Jesus Christ. God asks us to give boldly. God calls us to take risks for Jesus' sake, not always knowing the outcome. God calls us to share generously.

The master is angry because the one talent servant has nothing to show for the master's gift. True, he didn't lose it, but he also *didn't do anything with it*. He operated out of fear and scarcity, not with hope and abundance. The master wanted interest – something more coming from the investment – not just the investment itself. The servant worried about the gift instead of doing something with it.

Sloth or apathy works slowly - over a period of time. The passion for our faith in God begins to wane, and we don't do much about it. It just continues until we find ourselves at a place where we're not sure that God is good - and that God desires good for us. Some have called sloth "self-pity" or simply whining.

For Matthew's audience, this teaching comes in the context of waiting for Jesus to return – for his Second Coming. They were waiting. How do we wait faithfully for Jesus to return? We're still waiting, and the question is still how do we wait faithfully until Jesus comes again?

Faithful Christian living is a risk. Following Jesus is not and never has been a spectator sport. Two servants did something to further the interest of the master. They saw possibilities. They were committed to doing something with his gifts.

Any ministry we try is a risk. Sometimes it doesn't fly, but if we never try it, how will we know? There's a saying in baseball: "You can't be charged with an error unless you touch the ball." Lake Harbor exists because people took a risk to plant a church here 60 years ago.

We continue to take risks in thinking about what it means to be more vital as a church in this community. VCI has helped us to see ourselves more clearly and to keep on doing what we say we want to do - to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

There are people who know Jesus Christ and trust him because of your love and faith. Maybe you don't know it, but that's the truth. Your love for God doesn't go

unnoticed. And we can never stop sharing what it means to us that God's love is real and trustworthy. That matters when we come to worship, when we teach children, when we learn in small groups, when we share a meal with Family Promise guests, when we decide to give of our resources, when we pray for each other, when we commit to reading Scripture daily, when we serve with people from the Nelson neighborhood who are working for good in their community.

Jesus' words remind us of how much God has given to us. We cannot be fearful or apathetic with God's abundance in our lives. We're called to risk accepting God's grace so that we offer it to others. Yes, vulnerability opens us up for pain, but it also opens us up for learning. When we use the gifts of God, we can be assured that there will be a return – something we can hold onto and celebrate - and something we give God the glory for!

The flip side to sloth is referred to as diligence - or even zeal. It's having passion for the Good News of God's love and faithfulness. It's focusing on joy and where we see God's goodness and beauty around us. It's following through with the faith we claim. It's acting on faith and engaging our faith. It's that intentional faith development we talk about.

Parker Palmer says, "I now see that 'hanging on' is a fearful, needy, and clinging way to be in the world. But looking for what I want to give myself to transforms everything. It's taking me to a place where I find energy, trust, and new life." God calls us to risk our gifts – to go out on a limb for the sake of Jesus Christ. I've talked about ministry here, but what does it really mean for you and me? It means knowing what our gifts are. Many of you have completed a spiritual gifts inventory before. If you have, wonderful. If not, you should!

Perhaps you're feeling uncomfortable because God is nudging you in a direction that you don't want to go. God calls to get off our duffs and use our gifts to honor and glorify him. Get involved in a small group. Sing in the choir. Increase your financial giving. Work with Sunday School kids. Be a prayer partner for our youth – and really pray for them. Tutor a child at school. Visit a homebound friend. Try a new ministry – or offer support for one that's already happening. Someone told me once: "sometimes God uses the hardest parts of our lives to minister to others and to bring us healing."

The biggest risk is not risking at all - not living up to our full potential - our God-given potential. May we take the risk and use the gifts we have to the glory of God, who has given us the best gift in Jesus Christ.

Thanks be to God. AMEN.