

From Fear to Faith

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Performance Artist Robert O. Leaver

Preaching on:
Matthew 25:14–30

I think we're a nice-Jesus kind of church. I know that I'm a nice-Jesus kind of preacher. Man, do I struggle when Jesus says something like this: "For to all those who have more will be given, but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away." That doesn't sound very nice.

I love it when Jesus says, "So, the last will be first and the first will be last." That's *my* Jesus—turning the powers of this world unexpectedly upside down! And Jesus just said that five chapters ago in

Matthew. I preached a great sermon about it. No problem! But now here Jesus is saying what? Instead of the third slave with the least moving to the front of the line, his talent is taken away from him and given to the first slave who already has the most?! This is the exact opposite of the last will be first! This is the rich get richer and the poor get poorer, right? Something's got to be going on here.

We're not the only ones who are confused here. Plenty of Christians have been uncomfortable with this particular parable in Matthew right from the very beginning of the faith. In other gospels, the gospel writers try to make us feel less sympathy for the third slave. Luke says the third slave stores the money improperly—he doesn't bury it to keep it safe as was the accepted cultural practice at the time. He's careless with it. So, that explains the harsh judgment. In the Gospel of the Nazoreans, the third slave spends the money on wine and loose women, so obviously when the master throws that criminal in prison, it feels like justice—it completely contradicts the parable of the prodigal son, but it's something anyway.

Because when it comes to this poor guy in Matthew's gospel, I feel terrible for him. He wasn't irresponsible. He wasn't wicked. He was just afraid. He had the least of anybody, and he didn't want to risk it. He was cautious, scared. Haven't you ever been scared? I've been scared. And sometimes it's sidelined me too...

Last week I told you all about "hitting rock bottom" in my early twenties. Basically, I was running away from my call to ministry because I was intimidated by it. Basically, I was scared. I was afraid of failure because there are a bunch of scary things about being a minister. You have to do it all. You have to write and preach a sermon every single week for like the rest of your life. You have to always do and say the right things. You have to offer care to people in crisis, and make sure the grass has been cut properly, all while thinking of the big picture and having a plan for the future of the church, all at the same time, all while managing conflict and disappointment and disagreement, all while practicing healthy boundaries and finding balance and being spiritually healthy, and doing it all in a way that makes it look easy and inspires people.

It basically feels (from the outside looking in) that you have to be perfect. And I knew then (and still do) that I ain't perfect. My fear of my own life, led to a strong feeling of being unfulfilled, which led to depression and a spiritual hole in my life, which led to self-medicating and ultimately unhealthy behavior, which led me to one of those rock-bottom moments where you look in the mirror and you barely recognize the person you see reflected back at you. All because I was scared. All because I thought that the potential for failure was just too risky. Why did I think that? Why did I think that the potential for failure was such a terrible thing to risk?

An interesting thing about this parable is that it gives us no information about the hypothetical slave who got maybe three talents and went out and put them work, took risks, did his best, but through no real fault of his own cleverness and willingness to do business, ended up failing—ended up losing the money. What would the master have done to him? Well, we don't know. Which is interesting. In this

parable, failure is surprisingly not really an option. You either risk and succeed or you get scared, and you don't try at all. Risking and failing is not something that this parable wants us to worry about. That's our fear talking. And when we let that fear overcome us, that's when we end up at rock bottom—in the outer darkness. It's not failure we need to fear. As FDR famously said from the depth of the Great Depression, "All we have to fear is fear itself."

Now the story of how I went from rock bottom to the near-perfect superstar pastor standing before you today is just too long and involved a story for any one sermon, but it began with the realization that any risk, any failure was better than sitting myself out of my own life in the outer darkness that I had damned myself to out of fear of playing the game of life.

If I'm being honest, I wasn't just afraid of failure. I was in some unconscious way afraid of God. Maybe this is why I feel so much sympathy for the third slave. It's not failure he's afraid of, it's the master he's afraid of. He says it directly: "Master, I knew you were a harsh man, so I was afraid." "Oh, you believe, I'm harsh?" says the master. "Then I will judge you according to your own faith." It was my faith, my fear, that landed me in the self-exile of rock-bottom outer darkness. It wasn't a damning, judgmental God up in Heaven looking down his nose at me. It was God within me. I faced the judgment that I most feared to face because I allowed my fear to rule my reality.

I can't tell the whole story, but the turn around moment for me began with this simple act—I allowed myself to pray a fearless prayer to God. I don't remember exactly what I said but it was something like, "God, I want to risk everything for you, I don't want to play it safe, I want to give you everything I've got, I want to make a difference in the world even though I'm scared. I know you've got my back, I know you're calling me, I know you have a plan, I know it won't be easy, and I believe that if I live my life well that even if I fail I cannot fail. Take away my fear and show me the way." And once I prayed that prayer, everything changed. I opened the door just a crack and God came rushing through. And I was suddenly on the fast-track to seminary.

Now, since those miraculous days I have failed many times. I have messed up, missed the boat, fallen short. Many times. I've beaten myself up for these things at times, but I have never again known the outer darkness that I was in when I buried myself out of fear instead of trying out of faith.

Now, today is Consecration Sunday—in just a moment we're going to turn our pledge cards in with our weekly offering and we're going to bless them. Now, often this parable from Matthew gets interpreted through a Stewardship lens. We think this is a parable about investment, self-improvement, personal responsibility. But I don't think that's quite right. It's about fear.

And so my hope is that whatever number is on your pledge card today, that you turn it in fearlessly, in the presence of our God who wants nothing more than to welcome you into the joy of the kingdom of

heaven. Whatever may come in 2024, I know that we can't fail as long as we're willing to be church together.