

Thirty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time
November 19, 2017

The master in today's parable stands for Christ. The servants stand for each one of us. That's the first lesson we should think about. Do we think of ourselves as servants, as dependent on God? In this fallen world, most people tend to think of themselves as the center of the universe and our contemporary society, so full of technological power and easy pleasures, increases that tendency of our fallen nature. But this parable and many others are very clear: we are not God; we are not the center of the world; we are dependent upon God and our job in this life is to know him, love him, and serve him. Only by doing that will we find the happiness we desire, because doing that is what we were created for. Squirrels were created to be cute and bury nuts. Humans were created to know, love, and serve God and the parable also tells us how we are supposed to do that. God has given each of us a certain number of "talents." In Greek that word referred to a large sum of money. In the actual meaning of the parable, however, it refers more to what the English word implies - all the abilities and blessings we have received from God. God has given them to us, and we are free either to squander our gifts, burying them in the hole of self-indulgence, fear, laziness, and greed, or to use them as Christ would have us use them, which is the secret to happiness in this life and the life to come.

There is a wrong way to interpret this parable. Some might think that Jesus is telling us that we are supposed to earn our salvation by our own activity, our works. But Jesus is not saying that. He is not saying that if we pray a certain number of Rosaries and light a certain amount of candles we will then deserve entrance into heaven. In fact, the idea that we can earn our own salvation has been formally condemned as a heresy - the heresy of Pelagianism [puh-LAY-gee-uhn-izm]. Pelagius, a fourth-century monk, thought we could overcome evil, temptation, and the damage of original sin just by our own efforts and he was wrong; our efforts are useless without God's grace. If we look carefully at today's parable, we see that the activity of the servants is necessary, but secondary. The primary agent of success is the master. He gives his servants an opportunity to try and make good use of their talents. He also hands out the talents themselves in the first place. They didn't earn their original talents; they received them from the master's goodness. It's like that in our relationship with Christ. He gives us life, the world, our faith, forgiveness, the sacraments, our talents - innumerable gifts and if we use them well, they will serve their purpose, which is to bring us closer to him, to fill our minds with wisdom and our hearts

with joy, here on earth and forever in heaven. If we abuse those gifts, we can cut off our relationship with the one who gave them to us. But in either case, we are the secondary agents of success; we can't earn salvation; we can only receive the gift of God's grace and put it to good use. St Paul understood this well: the Christian life is a partnership in which God's grace plays the primary role, and our cooperation is the secondary, but necessary, role: In his letter to the Ephesians he says; "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not from you; it is the gift of God; it is not from works, so no one may boast" and in his first letter to the Corinthians he puts it this way; "But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me has not been ineffective. Indeed, I have toiled harder than all of them; not I, however, but the grace of God (that is) with me". The Catechism puts it like this (#1697): "... [I]t is by grace that we are saved and again it is by grace that our works can bear fruit for eternal life."

There are three steps we must follow in order to invest our gifts well - from a supernatural perspective. First, we must identify what our gift is. We should always thank God for all the countless blessings we have, but we should also reflect on the one or two strong characteristics, traits, or talents that God has given us personally. What type of thing do you enjoy most? What type of activity has always made you excited? What personality characteristic have people always complimented you on? What have you always dreamed of doing but were afraid to get started on? The second step is to get right with God and stay that way. The third servant left his life-mission unfulfilled because he didn't have a good relationship with his master. We will follow his tragic path unless we pray daily, clean our consciences regularly by going to confession, and continue to study the Bible and Church teaching; this is how we get to know our Lord and Savior and stay connected to the vine; and unless we do that, our talents will bear no fruit. The third step: put our gift at the service of others. Be creative, be courageous, be like Christ! He left us his new commandment - to love one another as he has loved us, and he showed us what love really is: to give our lives for others. We give our lives by putting our talents at the service of those around us instead of just serving ourselves. Every day at Mass Jesus gives us the perfect example of self-giving, through the Eucharist. When we receive him in Holy Communion, let's make a promise to him and to ourselves that we will go out and courageously invest our God-given gifts.