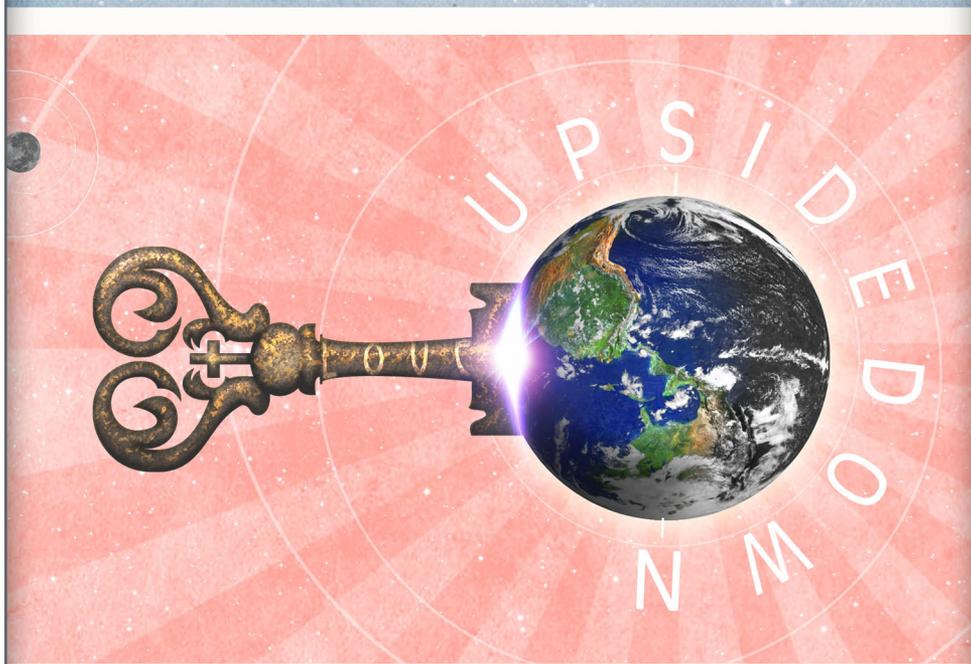


GOING DEEPER

DISCUSSION GUIDE

May 22, 2016



Discussion Guide

Engaging Our World

Connecting:

45 minutes

(The following questions are intended to provide your group with a way of connecting with one another so that you might partner in the work God is doing in your lives.)

- IN WHAT WAYS DID GOD MOVE IN YOUR LIFE THIS WEEK? IN WHAT WAYS DID YOU RESPOND TO HIM?
- WHAT WAS YOUR BIGGEST CHALLENGE THIS WEEK? IN WHAT WAYS, IF ANY, DID YOU INVITE GOD INTO THIS CHALLENGE?
- HOW HONEST HAVE YOU BEEN WITH US? (Graciously thank group

members for their honesty if they state they have held back.)

Getting Started:

10 minutes

- Does giving come naturally for you or do you find it difficult? Could you elaborate?

Diving Into the Text:

60 minutes

(The following questions are intended to provide your group with a simple road map through the text. Feel free to use these questions in ways that best fit your group and the dynamics of your own meeting.)

- Using the notes, discuss the background of a limited-good economy and how it influences

how we read the parables of Jesus.

- Read Matthew 25.14-30. Pause. Read the text once more, seeking to imagine the story unfolding?
- As you imagine the story, what do you notice? What stands out?
- In Jesus' stories, the characters often represent actual characters. In this parable, the master represents God while the servants represent God's people. With this in mind, read the story once more, paying attention to the interaction between the various characters.
- In this story, what is it that God desires? Seek to find as many as possible.
- In this story, what is it that God's people desire? Seek to find as many as possible. Which of these desires are in line with God's desires? Which are not?
- In what ways, if any, do you see this story play itself out today among God's people? What are the results?
- In this story, Jesus encourages his people to invest freely for the Kingdom of God out of the things God has freely given them, but he notes that fear keeps some people from acting in this way. This fear is a fear of losing what has been given. Do you see this same fear present in God's people today? What forms does it take?
- Do you ever wrestle with this fear of losing in your own life? Could you elaborate?
- It has been said that to overcome our fear we must do the very thing we are afraid of doing. How might this be the case with our fear of losing? How, if at all, might this be a form of opening to God?
- Consider closing by talking about how your group might open themselves to God so that he might transform any fear which is present in your hearts.

CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

MONEY MANAGEMENT IN THE ANCIENT WORLD

The concept of managing wealth in the ancient world differed vastly from our modern understandings of capitalism. In the ancient world, people understood the economic situation in terms of limited good; that is, people believed

that a specific amount of wealth existed and that no more could be generated. This view of a limitation of goods is understood when one considers wealth in terms of land, but this view was applied to all forms of wealth. In a limited-good economy, when one person obtained more another person by default had less. Therefore, to seek to make wealth or even to be rich was understood to be morally wrong because to be wealthy denied someone else the basic necessities of life. Wealthy people were expected to offset the impoverishment of others brought about by their gain by acting as patrons of communities and individuals. Specifically, wealthy people were expected to give away their wealth for the betterment of those from whom they had "stolen" it in the first place. Wealthy individuals who did not serve as patrons but continued to accumulate were viewed as rapacious and unscrupulous, worthy of the highest dishonor.

It is important to read Jesus' parables in light of the structures of this limited-good economy, rather than through our modern understanding of capitalism, if we are to grasp the significance of many of Jesus' parables. For instance, Jesus' parable of the talents in Matthew 25, when heard in the terms Jesus' audience understood would have left the audience gasping. In this parable, a wealthy landowner decides to go on a journey and hands over his wealth to his servants for the duration of his trip. In the ancient world, the servants would be expected to carry on the work of their master, whom we quickly discover to be unscrupulous. The master is one who cares little for the poor or needy in his land but is a hard man who is bent on obtaining everything. One servant stands against him, the servant who behaves in a morally upright manner by burying the money for safekeeping thereby protecting the poor from the unscrupulous master. (The rabbis taught that burying money was the most appropriate way to safeguard money. b. Baba Metzia 42a) However, this servant is not rewarded but punished by the morally reprehensible landowner. In Jesus' setting, the story is culturally tragic and offensive until one understands the purpose of Jesus' parable which is about the Kingdom of God. In this setting, the master stands for God. Thus, Jesus plainly says the Father wants everything. He has every intention of bringing everything into his kingdom and he intends that his servants engage in the same work. Jesus'

uses the shocking parable to draw in his audience so that he might contrast the actions of God with the actions of people. Unlike people, God is not interested in sharing but he is bent on claiming everything. He does not play by the rules of people. However, one can only hear this message, and that of other money-based parables, when one hears the parable in the proper economic setting.

THE TEXT

MATTHEW 25.14-30: GOD WANTS IT ALL

Jesus' parable about servants and bags of gold is actually the third parable in a series of four about the nature of the Kingdom of God ("Heaven" in Matthew). In these parables, Jesus speaks with increasing clarity about the work in which the people of God are to be engaging as they await the culmination of God's Kingdom in its fullness. It is important to note that these parables are spoken in reaction to conflict with the religious leaders and their failure to fulfill their covenantal relationship with God (Matthew 22-23). In response, Jesus outlines the proper responsibilities of God's people in light of God's movement to bring about his Kingdom. Rather than seeking to know the particulars of when and how God's Kingdom was coming (Matthew 25.36-51), God's people were to engage in watchfulness like servants awaiting the coming of a master which involved the carrying out of appropriate duties in the master's absence (Matthew 24-42-25.13). In his third parable, Jesus begins to detail the specific duties of God's people which are nothing short of the duties which the master himself would be doing (Matthew 25.14-30). Jesus proclaims the specifics of these duties in something of a hybrid parable about sheep and goats in which he presses into the consequences for those who claim to be God's people but fail to carry out their assigned duties (Matthew 25.31-46). It is important to hear these parables in light of God's covenant with his people. In a covenantal relationship, God's people demonstrate their relationship with God by imitating his character. Therefore, in the end, Jesus is simply saying that those who do not honor the covenant by imitating God as he works for his Kingdom are those who are not included in the covenant.

With his third parable, Jesus moves to specificity about the duties of God's people with a story

about three servants and bags of gold. In the language of the New Testament the bags of gold are "talents" or a sum of money which is approximately equivalent to 20 years' wages or enough money to hire 100 manual laborers for an entire year. In this story, a rich master decides to go on an extended journey and entrusts his vast wealth to three of his most trusted servants. In the culture, these servants were expected to carry on the work of the master in his absence, doing as he would do. The first two servants take the money given to them and double it while the third buries his money in the ground. In the ancient world, it is quickly apparent that the master is evil as are two of his servants while the third appears to be the hero, standing up against a greedy landowner. This kind of introduction would have drawn in Jesus' audience waiting to hear how the landowner is punished and the third servant becomes the heroic champion of the poor, but it doesn't happen this way. Jesus turns the tables on his audience when the master returns and rewards the first two servants and punishes the third for failing to act in line with his master's character. The master was greedy and rapacious, but the servant was afraid to behave in the same way. The nature of his fear is unstated but it seems to imply that he was afraid of losing the money he had been given and so he chose the safest route. He was no hero. He was a coward. Because of his cowardice in following his master's example, the servant is punished by being cast out of the master's presence.

At the end of this parable, Jesus' audience would have been dumbfounded. Nothing happened as it should. However, as is typical to Jesus' parables, nothing is as it seems. In Jesus' parables, the characters stand for various people. In this parable, the master stands for God while the servants stand for his people, in the context the religious leaders and disciples! We need not allegorize deeply or we will miss the point of Jesus' parable, but using these characters it is hard to miss what Jesus is saying. Simply put, Jesus claims that God has given his people everything they possess. In fact, God has entrusted everything he has with his people, intending that they use it as he would use it. The intentions of the master are that his possessions grow; that is, God intends to possess everything! Two servants understand this and use what God has given them to expand his Kingdom. One servant is afraid of losing what

God has entrusted to him and decides to play it safe. He refuses to invest the wealth he has been given and thereby acts contrary to the character of the master, but this behavior is not forgiven, something understood in light of covenantal devotion because it denies covenant.

For those who pressed in, Jesus' parable makes a logical progression. (1) God has entrusted the entirety of his wealth with his people. Everything they have comes from him. (2) God rewards those who use what he has given them for the expansion of his Kingdom because they honor their covenantal relationship with him, acting as he would act. (3) God "punishes"/rejects those who refuse to use what has been entrusted to them out of fear or losing the little they have been given because they have refused to honor their covenantal relationship with him.

REAL LIFE WITH BLAKE:

How do we engage our world? We engage it as God does, in love. Love shows up and speaks up. We see this in the person of Christ, but we see more. When Christ showed up, he did more than just speak up. Jesus was more than a talking head, running around spouting off parables and sermons. Jesus slowed down and gave of himself. He gave his nights to questioners like Nicodemus. He gave his days to the crowds who were hard pressed and hurting. He gave his rushed times to parents of dead little girls and bleeding women. He gave his honor to defend adulterous women and tax collectors. It is hard to find anything that Jesus was not willing to give of himself. He did not even withhold his life, and all of this for the sake of the Kingdom, the coming of God's reign upon earth. If I wish to be like him, I must do the same. I must be willing to give it all. Actually, I must be more than willing. I must give... and that is where it gets sticky. I don't like to give. I suppose I should. . .everything I have is from God, but he gave it to me, and should I give it. . .well, I won't have it anymore. Maybe that is the problem. It isn't that I don't like giving. I don't like not having. I am afraid that if I give, I will not have. It is this fear of not having, of losing what I have that keeps me tightfisted with my time, my money, my attention, my heart. I keep it close because I can't lose it. But, the Kingdom cannot grow if I am not willing to give, if I am not willing to share what I have been given.

The Kingdom can only grow when I invest my nights with those who are questioning, when I give my days to those who are hurting, when I give my heart to those who are wandering and questioning. In this giving, the Kingdom grows, but I no longer have. I have lost my day, my night, my heart. But, have I really lost when the Kingdom grows? Have I really lost when the only Kingdom to shrink is my own?

REAL LIFE WITH YOU:

How do we engage our world? If we do it as God did it, we do it with love. Love involves investing, the giving of all that God has given us for the sake of the Kingdom. This is where it gets hard. It is one thing to talk about the Kingdom. It is of another order to give for the Kingdom, to give our time, our energy, our money, our honor, our very lives. It is difficult to give because we are afraid of losing, of losing what we have. What I am coming to realize is that our tightfistedness is really nothing more than an attempt to build our own Kingdom, to take what was lent to us and call it our own. The Kingdom doesn't grow like that, at least God's doesn't. God wants his Kingdom to grow. He is bent on having it all, and he is willing to do anything to get it. The trouble is he has given us everything he has. . .so, if the Kingdom is to grow, we must give. Giving isn't easy and it isn't natural in a world and culture which values possession. Then again, God is all about turning the world upside down. This week, we invite you to consider learning to give. We learn to give by giving. I know, it sounds crazy but it is the only way. This week, intentionally give something. It doesn't have to be money. It can be an hour you don't think you have to spare, attention you don't think you can give, or honor you don't think you can part with. Give it, even if it is just a little and see what transpires. See if joy does not fill your heart and the desire to give more does not fill you. When this feeling arises, act upon it and give again. In so doing, you begin to partner with what God is doing through you for the sake of his Kingdom.



SENIOR
PASTOR
BLAKE
SHIPP

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