

Good and Trustworthy
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1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

¹Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anything written to you. ²For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. ³When they say, "There is peace and security," then sudden destruction will come upon them, as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and there will be no escape! ⁴But you, beloved, are not in darkness, for that day to surprise you like a thief; ⁵for you are all children of light and children of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness. ⁶So then let us not fall asleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober; ⁷for those who sleep sleep at night, and those who are drunk get drunk at night. ⁸But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, and put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. ⁹For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, ¹⁰who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him. ¹¹Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.

Matthew 25:14-30

¹⁴"For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; ¹⁵to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. ¹⁶The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. ¹⁷In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. ¹⁸But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money. ¹⁹After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. ²⁰Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, 'Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents.' ²¹His master said to him, 'Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.' ²²And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, 'Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents.' ²³His master said to him, 'Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.' ²⁴Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, 'Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; ²⁵so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.' ²⁶But his master replied, 'You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? ²⁷Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. ²⁸So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. ²⁹For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. ³⁰As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'

It just so happens that the Wednesday Bible Study group was just talking about our reading from 1 Thessalonians this past week so I'll let you in on what they already know. This letter to the Thessalonians is believed to be the earliest of all the writings in the New Testament. The people of Thessalonica were living in a time not so many years after the death and resurrection of Christ and they

believed his coming again was imminent. As a result, some of them were getting lazy - not working, relying on others to support them, resting on the laurels of their good Christian deeds to date.

Paul, though still convinced that Jesus will come again before he leaves this world, worries for them and their laxity. In this letter, he is urging them to not be caught by surprise and unprepared, not at their best. He speaks of Jesus coming again like a thief in the night and like a woman's labor pains not because it will be bad or painful but because no one can predict when. That holds true for us today. Just like the Thessalonians, we should not put off doing good today for there may not be a tomorrow.

The parable in Matthew appears to be about investing wisely but surely it cannot be as literal as investing money. I venture to suggest the talents given are more comparable to the Word of God. The slaves of the master can either bring the Word of the Lord out to the world and make it multiply, and so be good and trustworthy, or they can, in fear, hide it, leaving it to do nothing. With the season of Advent, we will particularly remember that Jesus was the word and the word was with God and the word was God (John 1) and that Jesus came as the light of the world (John 8). Jesus, and his promises and gifts, are the Word to be shared and not hidden. Jesus is the light to be shared. Paul urges the Thessalonians, and us, to remember that we are children of the light and children of the day, not of the night or of darkness.

What makes it dark? Like the darkness Paul speaks of and the darkness Matthew speaks of? There is darkness when light is absorbed but not reflected. The third slave absorbed, took the light, the talent, the Word of God, but did not reflect it outwardly. In fear, he chose to hold onto it because he had incorrect beliefs about his master. He said he knew that his master reaped where he did not sow and gathered where he did not scatter. The readings today are so theologically rich that I hope you'll forgive me a quick tangent on this topic.

This slave was sure he knew, he understood, what his master did and why and how. If you have ever been confronted with a troubling situation where God does not behave like you expected, have you been left to consider maybe God's wisdom is bigger, greater, grander than your own? How we wish we could see immediately the good God is bringing forth from bad! In God's time, though, means that good may evolve outside of our years here, a difficult realization and one that can be hard to accept when we are hurting. This master of this slave appeared to have collected a harvest from beyond his field. Could this reaping be the people who were not Jews, the Gentiles who were not, as far as the Jews understood, part of the original plan of salvation? God chooses to save who God chooses to save, God chooses to love who God chooses to love - not always who we think God should save and love.

So back to the light and the darkness and the Thessalonians. Paul urges them not to put off doing good, not to put off sharing the Word. These people who thought the end was nigh must have figured,

“what’s one more believer in the grand scheme of things?” Paul said, “Don’t take that risk - what if you have two more days until the coming and maybe two more who come to faith because of you, or two more years and 700 more come to faith?” How will you answer when that time comes? Do not be unprepared as those who sleep! Keep awake, keep alert, do not give in to laziness or complacency - there’s that word again - but be active in your faith.

Matthew’s telling of this parable of Jesus’ shares a similar point. Do not hide the Word for fear of getting it wrong, for “doing it wrong.” Again, when Advent arrives, we will be reminded of the words of many angels to many humans: “Do not fear.” Perhaps the first words of Genesis should be the same; before you dip into this book of wisdom, do not fear. The angel tells Mary that God is with her. As you explore your faith and explore the foundation of your faith through the Bible, do not fear for God is with you. We will invariably get something wrong - that’s how we learn, that’s a natural part of engaging with God and with God’s word - we can’t get it right all the time, not even those of us who have gone to seminary. It is far better to try and fail than to never have tried. Take a risk like the first two slaves; without the risk, there is no chance of reward, no chance of being considered good and trustworthy.

Don’t be afraid to share your faith just because you might get a doctrine wrong or because you don’t remember much from your childhood Sunday School or because you haven’t read the Bible from cover to cover. Don’t be afraid to share your faith because it is uncool or because you don’t want to offend another. Having faith is not an offensive behavior. Sometimes people can share their faith in a condescending way or in a way that belittles - it’s not the faith itself that is offensive but the manner in which it is professed. Being an openly faithful person is not offensive.

Ben Stein, most recently a comedian and actor, previously a speech-writer for Nixon and Ford, and always a man of the Jewish faith, shared a commentary in 2005 from his own perspective about the attempts to make faith vanilla, palatable to all, even the non-believer. What follows are excerpts from what he calls his confession. He says:

I am a Jew and every single one of my ancestors was Jewish, and it does not bother me even a little bit when people call those beautifully lit-up, bejeweled trees, Christmas trees. I don’t feel threatened. I don’t feel discriminated against. That’s what they are - Christmas trees. It doesn’t bother me a bit when people say ‘Merry Christmas’ to me. I don’t think they’re slighting me or getting ready to put me in a ghetto. In fact, I kind of like it. It shows that we are all brothers and sisters celebrating this happy time of year. It doesn’t bother me one bit that there’s a manger scene on display at a key intersection at my beach house in Malibu.

If people want a creche, fine. The menorah a few hundred yards away is fine, too. I do

not like getting pushed around for being a Jew, and I don't think Christians like being pushed around for being Christians. I think people who believe in God are sick and tired of getting pushed around, period. I have no idea where the concept came from that America is an explicitly atheist country. I can't find it in the Constitution and I don't like it being shoved down my throat.

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Funny how simple it is for people to trash God and then wonder why the world's going to [heck]. Funny how we believe what the newspapers say, but question what the Bible says. Funny how you can send 'jokes' through e-mail and they spread like wildfire but when you start sending messages regarding the Lord, people think twice about sharing.¹

If I may summarize, Mr. Stein believes that the world is going downhill, in part, because we are more and more afraid to talk about our faith and our God. Advent is especially a season of light and Advent is coming. Ben Stein is neither Paul nor Jesus but he is a man of faith who is not afraid to share it and to talk about God and so today, I would count him among God's prophets. Do not put off doing good today, sharing the Word of God in whatever way fits your gifts and your calling because you might get it wrong, because you might offend, because you did it last week or last month. Do not fear! Instead be like the good and trustworthy ones who take a risk on God because God first took a risk on them.

Let us pray: God of light, grant that we might reflect the light of your love today and tomorrow and the day after that until Christ comes again. Amen.

¹ <http://www.snopes.com/politics/soapbox/confessions.asp>