

Courage in Service

SERVICE & SPIRITUALITY

There are seasons in every servant's life when the work itself requires not only fidelity but courage. A word must be spoken that no one else is willing to speak. A person must be loved who makes himself hard to love. A stand must be taken when an easier posture is available. A cross, small or large, must be picked up in the middle of a Tuesday. This lesson looks at courage as the Scriptures and Fathers understand it — not as a temperament some of us were born with and others were not, but as a gift of the Holy Spirit given to those who ask for it, and strengthened through use. We will see that the courage of the servant is not bravado and not stubbornness; it is the steady willingness to remain where the Lord has placed us, speak what He has asked us to speak, and endure what He has permitted us to endure, because He Himself is with us there.

The Shape of Christian Courage

The world's picture of courage is often a moment — a decisive act caught in the spotlight of a crisis. The Scripture's picture of courage is almost the opposite. It is long. It is usually quiet. It consists, most of the time, in simply not running away. The Greek word the New Testament uses most often for courage is *tharseo*, a word our Lord Himself speaks to frightened disciples on more than one occasion: 'Be of good cheer; it is I; do not be afraid' (Matthew 14:27). Courage, in His mouth, is the other side of fear dissolved by His nearness.

"These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world." John 16:33, NKJV

Notice the grammar of His sentence. Our courage is not a quality we must first manufacture; it is a consequence of His victory. 'I have overcome.' The world's pressure is real, but it is no longer final. The servant who grasps this in his bones can stand where others sit down.

Augustine gives us a lovely small definition that has traveled down the centuries:

"Fortitude is the love of God bearing all things readily for His sake." St. Augustine, On the Morals of the Catholic Church XV

Courage, for the Christian, is love in its enduring form. It is not detached bravery; it is affection for the Lord strong enough to carry the weight that love always eventually asks us to carry.

The Fear That Silences Us

Most of us do not lose our courage in a moment of persecution. We lose it, bit by bit, to smaller fears — the fear of being disliked, the fear of being misunderstood, the fear of losing standing with a friend or a family member. These fears have a name in the Scriptures: the fear of man.

“The fear of man brings a snare, but whoever trusts in the Lord shall be safe.”
Proverbs 29:25, NKJV

Proverbs calls it a snare — a trap that catches animals by the leg. That is exactly what it does to servants. It catches us when a hard truth ought to be said in love and we say nothing. It catches us when a student is wandering and we do not want to be the one to raise the question. It catches us when the culture around us is moving against the Gospel and we would rather not be noticed.

Our Lord speaks directly to this fear in the instruction He gives His disciples before sending them out.

“Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.” Matthew 10:28, NKJV

The cure for the fear of man is not a larger dose of self-confidence; it is a larger awe of God. When the Lord grows heavier in our sight, the opinions of men grow lighter. This is not a technique; it is a slow reorientation of the heart that happens in the places of prayer and worship the previous unit described.

Courage to Speak

One of the particular courages asked of a servant is the courage to speak. The prophets knew this. Jeremiah was told to stand and speak at the city gate; Ezekiel was placed as a watchman whose silence would be accounted against him. The New Testament continues the pattern. The apostles before the Sanhedrin did not argue; they simply bore witness.

“Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated and untrained men, they marveled. And they realized that they had been with Jesus.” Acts 4:13, NKJV

The Greek word for 'boldness' here is *parrhesia* — freedom of speech, the frankness of those who have nothing to hide and nothing to lose. The council noticed that this boldness was not the product of their education; it was the residue of their company. They had been with Jesus, and courage was what the nearness had left behind in them.

For our own work, the application is direct. A servant who stays close to the Lord receives, almost without noticing, the gift of speech when it is needed. A servant who has drifted from that nearness will find the words difficult to come by, because *parrhesia* is not mainly a technique but a trace. We need to guard, therefore, not only the moments of hard conversation but the hours of quiet communion that precede them.

“The sign of a man who has true freedom of speech before God is not that he speaks much, but that his words, few or many, come forth unafraid, having been first spoken in prayer.” St. John Climacus, The Ladder of Divine Ascent, Step 28

Courage to Stay

There is a particular kind of courage that does not look like courage at all — the courage to stay. A servant who has been loving a difficult community for seven years and has not left is exercising a discipline that a single dramatic act could never match. The temptation in every difficult service is to find a reason to move on: a new parish, a new ministry, a new group of people who may be easier. Sometimes the Lord does move us; more often, He calls us to remain.

“Let us not grow weary while doing good, for in due season we shall reap if we do not lose heart.” Galatians 6:9, NKJV

The phrase 'lose heart' is the exact opposite of courage. To lose heart is to be emptied of the Lord's own encouragement, and the remedy is not a bigger push but a deeper drinking from the well. A servant who is considering giving up should first ask whether he is drinking.

Isaac the Syrian, who spent his life observing the long perseverance of the monks, wrote with the tenderness of one who had stood beside many who were ready to give up:

“Do not say, 'I cannot.' Say, 'Yet a little, with the Lord's help.' A thousand times the good man falls, and a thousand times he rises. This very pattern is the beauty of his life before God.” St. Isaac the Syrian, Ascetical Homilies XLVII

The servant who rises again is the servant who is exercising courage in its truest form — the courage not to let yesterday's failure decide tomorrow's faithfulness.

Courage to Be Unseen

A less obvious courage, but one essential to the long life of the servant, is the courage to labor without being seen — and to labor especially when it would be easy to arrange for the work to be noticed. The Lord has warned us, in the gentlest and most pointed way, that the praise we harvest from men is the whole reward we will ever receive for that particular deed.

“Take heed that you do not do your charitable deeds before men, to be seen by them. Otherwise you have no reward from your Father in heaven.” Matthew 6:1, NKJV

Courage to be unseen means that we are willing to do the hidden work — the prayer offered in a room with the door closed, the quiet note of encouragement unsigned, the extra hour with the struggling student after everyone has gone home — because we are serving an Audience whose reward is real and whose memory is perfect. This is the same courage that St. Andrew possessed, as the previous unit described: a freedom from the need to be noticed.

It takes courage to be unseen precisely because we are social creatures who feed on recognition. The servant who offers his labor to the Lord rather than to his peers is learning the deepest freedom a human being can learn.

Growing the Gift

Courage, like every fruit of the Spirit, is grown rather than manufactured. The Scriptures and the Fathers agree on the means by which it grows.

First, courage grows by remembered presence. 'Fear not, for I am with you' is the sentence God gives His servants again and again — to Abraham, to Moses, to Joshua, to Jeremiah, to Paul. The deliberate remembering that He is with us in the current difficulty is itself an exercise of courage.

“Be strong and of good courage, do not fear nor be afraid of them; for the Lord your God, He is the One who goes with you. He will not leave you nor forsake you.”

Deuteronomy 31:6, NKJV

Second, courage grows by small obediences. The large stand is prepared for, silently, by thousands of small ones. A servant who has spoken the gentle truth in a dozen small conversations is a servant who will be ready when a hard one comes. We practice courage the way a musician practices scales.

Third, courage grows by the prayers of the Church. We do not have to generate bravery alone. The Divine Liturgy is full of petitions that the servants of God be strengthened, and those petitions are not decorative. They are answered — sometimes suddenly, more often slowly, always reliably.

Fourth, courage grows by the stories of the saints. When we are afraid of a difficult conversation, it helps to remember that St. Athanasius stood against the whole empire, that St. Moses the Black left the wilderness to welcome his executioners with tea, that St. Mary of Egypt walked into her own long desert, that the martyrs sang on their way to the flames. Their courage is ours too, if we are willing to be drawn into their company.

May the Lord who has overcome the world make us, in our small daily hour, servants who are not afraid. May He give us the parrhesia of those who have been with Him, the patience of those who do not grow weary, the hiddenness of those who serve His eyes only, and the peace of those who know He has not left them alone in the work. May we say in every season what Joshua was told to say on the edge of the Jordan: 'The Lord my God is with me wherever I go.'

Review Questions

1. Our Lord's own definition of courage — 'be of good cheer, I have overcome the world' — roots courage in His victory rather than our temperament. Where in our current service are we being invited to stand on His victory rather than on our own strength?

2. Proverbs names the 'fear of man' as a snare. What specific fear of others (disapproval, being misunderstood, losing a relationship) most often catches us, and what would it look like this week to be freed from it?
3. The apostles' boldness before the Sanhedrin was the residue of their company with Jesus. How does our current rhythm of prayer and worship protect, or erode, the parrhesia we need for the conversations ahead of us?
4. The courage to stay is often harder than the courage to act. Where are we tempted to leave a difficult field the Lord is asking us to remain in, and what drinking from the well would renew us there?
5. The Lord warns that deeds done to be seen receive their reward from the seeing. Where in our service is the secret audience of the Father being quietly traded for the audience of our peers?
6. Isaac the Syrian says, 'A thousand times the good man falls, and a thousand times he rises.' How does this picture of courage as repeated rising change the way we evaluate a week that has felt full of failure?
7. Name one saint whose courage speaks to our current situation. What does walking, for a moment, in that saint's company make possible for us today?

Books & References

Scripture: Scripture in this lesson is quoted from the New King James Version (NKJV) unless otherwise noted.

Further Reading:

- The Holy Bible, New King James Version (NKJV). Thomas Nelson.
- St. Augustine of Hippo, On the Morals of the Catholic Church. Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series I, Vol. 4.
- St. John Climacus, The Ladder of Divine Ascent. Translated by Archimandrite Lazarus Moore.
- St. Isaac the Syrian, The Ascetical Homilies. Holy Transfiguration Monastery (Boston).
- St. Athanasius, Life of Antony. Translated in Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series II, Vol. 4.
- Fr. Tadros Y. Malaty, Patristic Commentary on the Book of Acts (on Acts 4).

Patristic texts are cited in widely available English translations; where sense required, phrasing has been lightly modernized without altering meaning.

Lesson Notes

Avoiding Service

SERVICE & SPIRITUALITY

Before we can labor faithfully in the Lord's vineyard, we must recognize the many gentle and respectable ways by which a servant's heart learns to avoid the work. The Scriptures are candid about this. Moses hid behind his unfit lips. Jonah ran to Tarshish. The rich young ruler turned sorrowfully away. The invited guests in the parable sent polite excuses. None of these stories is about monstrous wickedness; each is about a human heart finding a reasonable way to step back from a call. In this lesson we look at the faces avoidance wears in a servant's life, why it works so quietly on us, and what grace the Lord has provided so that our 'no' can be turned into a yes. The goal is not self-reproach but clear-eyed honesty — the honesty without which none of us will finish the race.

The Many Faces of Avoidance

Avoidance rarely announces itself. It does not say, 'I will not serve the Lord today.' It speaks in the language of reasonable constraints and appropriate priorities. A servant who has learned to spot its voice is a servant who has taken a large step toward fidelity.

Jonah is perhaps the clearest portrait in the Scriptures. The Lord said 'Go to Nineveh.' Jonah's feet were already moving toward Tarshish before his prayer had finished. 'But Jonah arose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord' (Jonah 1:3). The direction is striking: not toward Nineveh, not toward another assignment, but away from the presence of the Lord. Avoidance, when we follow it far enough, always points us away from Him.

Moses, by contrast, shows us avoidance dressed in humility. 'O my Lord, I am not eloquent, neither before nor since You have spoken to Your servant; but I am slow of speech and slow of tongue' (Exodus 4:10). It sounds self-effacing. It is also a refusal. The Lord's patience with Moses is lovely, but it is patience with a reluctance that was real.

The invited guests in our Lord's parable give us the most modern face of avoidance:

"But they all with one accord began to make excuses. The first said to him, 'I have bought a piece of ground, and I must go and see it. I ask you to have me excused.' And another said, 'I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I am going to test them. I ask you to have me excused.' Still another said, 'I have married a wife, and therefore I cannot come.'" Luke 14:18–20, NKJV

Land, labor, family. Not evils — goods. Each guest had a good reason. And yet the evening of the Master's supper passed them by. The most dangerous avoidances of the servant are almost always defended by something good.

For our own examination, it helps to name the common varieties: the busyness that never quite frees a Saturday; the self-doubt that waits for credentials that will never come; the perfectionism that will start serving once circumstances are right; the over-commitment that has no room to say yes because it has not learned to say no; the private hurt that makes us step back from the very people the Lord is asking us to step toward. None of these is wicked; each, unchallenged, quietly absorbs the life of a would-be servant.

The Root Beneath the Faces

Underneath the many faces of avoidance there is almost always a single root: fear. Sometimes it is the fear we examined in the previous lesson — fear of man, fear of failure. Sometimes it is a more tender fear: the fear of being changed. The servant who truly gives himself to the Lord will not come back the same. He will be asked to love people he had not planned to love, to forgive what he had not planned to forgive, to let go of what he had not planned to release. The Lord does not hide this cost, and a part of us knows it, and the part that knows it often pulls on the brake.

“Then Jesus said to His disciples, ‘If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me.’” Matthew 16:24, NKJV

Chrysostom speaks gently to this fear:

“Why do many turn away from the Master's call? Not because they hate the Master, but because they love the cross less than they love their ease. Yet the cross, when it is embraced, is found to be lighter than the burden of avoiding it.” St. John Chrysostom, Homilies on Matthew LV.2

The pastoral point is important. Most people who are avoiding service are not rebels; they are simply afraid. A servant who understands this will treat himself — and others who are hesitating — with the tenderness the Lord Himself showed to Moses at the burning bush.

Busyness as a Shield

One particular face of avoidance deserves its own paragraph because it is the most common in our time. It is busyness — a life so full of approved activity that there is no room to hear the call more deeply. Busyness is the respectable avoidance. It makes us look responsible while we are, in fact, arranging our schedule so that the Lord cannot interrupt us.

“And they all with one accord began to make excuses.” Luke 14:18, NKJV

The servant must periodically audit his calendar with this question: is any of what fills my week actually a hiding place? The answer will often be surprising. Not always — work and family are real callings — but sometimes. The practice of a weekly quiet hour before the Lord, calendar in hand, is one of the most faithful disciplines a servant can keep.

St. Basil, who pastored a large and active city, writes with a clarity worth carrying:

“We fill our lives with many things that have no weight in heaven, and then wonder that we have no time for the One who has weight in heaven and earth. Let us begin every season by asking what must be laid aside, and then by laying it aside in fact.” St. Basil the Great, Letter II (To Gregory)

The Cost of Avoidance

It is important to face, with sobriety and without fear, what is at stake when avoidance wins. Jonah is again our teacher. His running did not keep him safe; it put him in a storm, and in the belly of a great fish, and in a darkness he had not bargained for. The Lord's mercy retrieved him — and it will retrieve us — but the storm is real.

The parable of the talents, which we will study in the next lesson, ends with a judgment we would rather not quote but must. The servant who hid his talent was not condemned for wickedness in the ordinary sense; he was condemned for fear that had become refusal.

“His lord answered and said to him, ‘You wicked and lazy servant...’” Matthew 25:26, NKJV

The word 'lazy' here is the Greek *okneros* — hesitant, shrinking, given to drawing back. The Lord uses a surprisingly strong word for what looks, from the outside, like modest caution. The reason is clear: the kingdom is not served by burying what has been entrusted to us. Our gifts are for the using.

The cost of avoidance is also felt in the souls we might have served. There is a classroom, a parish, a neighbor, a cousin, a child who would have been reached by our yes, and who will not be reached if our yes never comes. We do not know who these people are, but the Lord does. Every servant who is tempted to back away from the work should pause for a moment and consider whether a name he does not yet know is waiting for the sentence only he can speak.

The Grace That Meets Our Reluctance

The Scriptures are not harsh with reluctance; they are patient with it. The Lord answered Moses not with a rebuke but with a brother: 'Is not Aaron the Levite your brother? I know that he can speak well... And you shall speak to him and put the words in his mouth, and I will be with your mouth and with his mouth' (Exodus 4:14–15). The Lord answered Jonah by following him into the storm. The Lord answered Peter's denials not with dismissal but with a lakeside breakfast and three renewed invitations to feed His sheep.

This is our hope when we see avoidance in ourselves. The Lord does not shame us for it. He simply, tenderly, calls again. The right response to noticing that we have been avoiding is not despair or self-punishment; it is to turn and come back.

“Return to Me, and I will return to you, says the Lord of hosts.” Malachi 3:7, NKJV

Macarius, writing to monks who had many reasons to give up, gives a warm sentence that every servant should memorize:

“If the soul that has drawn back will but turn her face again toward the Lord, she shall find Him already standing in the road to meet her. For He never ceased going out in search of her, even while she was going out in search of reasons.” St. Macarius the Great, Spiritual Homilies XIX (paraphrased)

Saying Yes Today

Avoidance is defeated not by resolutions for next month but by a small yes today. The servant who is listening will usually know what today's yes is. It is the email he has been postponing, the conversation he has been rehearsing, the commitment he has been half-making. Our Lord's method is almost always to ask for the next small step, not the whole staircase.

It also helps to name, specifically, what we are avoiding. Avoidance lives on vagueness. The moment we write down the thing — 'I have been avoiding calling my brother for six months,' or 'I have been avoiding saying yes to teaching Sunday school' — it begins to lose its hold. Confession is once again the great unbinder. Many a servant's first step out of a long avoidance has been a frank word spoken to a father of confession.

And it helps to remember that we are not being asked to serve on our own strength. The same Lord who calls us promises to come with us. 'Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age' (Matthew 28:20). The yes we give today is met by a grace we could not have produced, and it is that grace, not our courage, that will carry the work.

May the Lord who has called us by name have patience with our running, and may He call us again, as He called Jonah, as He called Moses, as He called Peter, as He called each saint whose name we love. May He deliver us from the respectable avoidances of our time — the calendar too full, the excuse too reasonable, the self-doubt too familiar — and may He draw from us today, not tomorrow, the small yes that places us once again in the path of His work. Every yes given today becomes, by His grace, the foundation of a faithful life.

Review Questions

1. Of the faces of avoidance named in this lesson (busyness, self-doubt, perfectionism, over-commitment, private hurt), which is most active in us right now, and how do we recognize its voice?
2. Jonah's flight pointed away 'from the presence of the Lord.' When our own avoidance is followed to its source, where does it point, and what does that tell us?
3. The invited guests in Luke 14 used goods (land, labor, family) to decline the Master's supper. Which of the good things in our life has lately been quietly used to say 'excuse me' to Him?

4. Fear of being changed often lies under our reluctance to serve. What change is the Lord currently asking us to allow Him to make, and what gentle step could we take toward it this week?
5. Busyness is the respectable avoidance. If we audited this week's calendar in a quiet hour before the Lord, what is one thing we might see that we have not been willing to see?
6. The parable of the talents condemns the servant not for wickedness but for hesitation that became refusal. Where has our own hesitation begun to harden, and what would renewed investment look like?
7. Malachi offers the Lord's word: 'Return to Me, and I will return to you.' What is the one small 'today yes' by which we might turn and begin the return?

Books & References

Scripture: Scripture in this lesson is quoted from the New King James Version (NKJV) unless otherwise noted.

Further Reading:

- The Holy Bible, New King James Version (NKJV). Thomas Nelson.
- St. John Chrysostom, Homilies on the Gospel of Matthew, LV. Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series I, Vol. 10.
- St. Basil the Great, Letters. Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series II, Vol. 8.
- St. Macarius the Great, Spiritual Homilies. Translated by A. J. Mason. SPCK, 1921.
- St. Augustine, Sermons on the Gospel of Luke (on Luke 14).
- Fr. Tadros Y. Malaty, Patristic Commentary on the Book of Jonah.

Patristic texts are cited in widely available English translations; where sense required, phrasing has been lightly modernized without altering meaning.

Lesson Notes

Trading with Our Talents

SERVICE & SPIRITUALITY

The parable of the talents (Matthew 25:14–30) is one of our Lord's most searching stories about the life of a servant. A master goes on a journey and entrusts his property to his slaves. Two of them trade with what they have been given; one buries it and waits for the master's return. When the master comes back, the two who traded are praised and given more; the one who buried is reproached and sent away. The previous lesson of this section, 'Discovering Our Talents,' asked what the Lord has placed in our hands. This lesson asks the next question: now that we know what has been given, what does it mean to trade with it? The parable is not about financial investing; it is about the active, responsible, risk-accepting deployment of every gift the Lord has entrusted to us — for His kingdom, on His timetable, with the expectation that He will one day ask for an account.

The Parable Reread

Let us set the story before us again, slowly, because familiarity sometimes dulls its edge.

“For the kingdom of heaven is like a man traveling to a far country, who called his own servants and delivered his goods to them. And to one he gave five talents, to another two, and to another one, to each according to his own ability; and immediately he went on a journey. Then he who had received the five talents went and traded with them, and made another five talents. And likewise he who had received two gained two more also. But he who had received one went and dug in the ground, and hid his lord's money.” Matthew 25:14–18, NKJV

Three details are worth noticing. First, the master gives 'to each according to his own ability.' The distribution is not arbitrary; it is tailored to what each servant can actually handle. This is important for our own examination: the Lord knows what we can carry, and He has given us neither too much nor too little.

Second, the two faithful servants 'went and traded.' The verb is active, immediate, and without hesitation. They did not wait for further instruction. They had been given, and they went.

Third, the servant who was given the least is the one who buried. The parable is gentle here: small gifts tempt us to inaction more than large ones. 'It is only one talent; why bother?' The logic of the buried talent is the logic of many small servants who have stopped serving because their gift seemed too modest to matter.

What Trading Means

To 'trade' with a talent, in the language of the parable, means three things at once. It means to use it — actually to deploy it in the real world, not only to cultivate it in private. It means to risk it — to place it where loss is possible, because no gain is possible without risk. And it means to multiply it — to expect, by the Lord's grace, that what is used faithfully will increase.

“For to everyone who has, more will be given, and he will have abundance; but from him who does not have, even what he has will be taken away.” Matthew 25:29, NKJV

This sentence is a parable of spiritual physics. A gift used grows; a gift hidden atrophies. The student who teaches what she has learned knows it twice as well by the end of the semester. The musician who plays before people learns more in an evening of risk than in a month of private practice. The servant who quietly visits the sick discovers gifts of presence he did not know he had. The law is reliable: the Lord multiplies what is placed in His service.

Chrysostom saw this with great clarity:

“God hath given to each of us something; to one more, to another less. But from each He requireth the using, not the number. The woman who gave two mites was praised more than the rich who cast in much; for she traded all she had, while they but risked a portion.” St. John Chrysostom, Homilies on Matthew LXXVIII.2

Why the Third Servant Failed

The third servant is worth pausing over, because most of our failures look more like his than like a dramatic rebellion. He did not steal the money. He did not spend it on himself. He simply kept it safe until the master returned. His defense, when it came, was careful:

“Lord, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you have not sown, and gathering where you have not scattered seed. And I was afraid, and went and hid your talent in the ground. Look, there you have what is yours.” Matthew 25:24–25, NKJV

Two things undid him. First, he had a wrong picture of his master — 'a hard man.' That picture of the Lord is still common. Some of us serve from fear rather than love, and fear is always cautious. It hides. It plays not to lose rather than to gain. A servant who pictures God as a strict accountant will almost always bury what he has been given.

Second, he let fear drive his action. 'And I was afraid, and went and hid.' Fear, as the previous lesson said, is often the root beneath avoidance. Here it is given its crispest outcome. The buried talent is not simply unused; it is actively kept away from the work for which it was given.

The master's response is sharp but also revealing:

“You wicked and lazy servant, you knew that I reap where I have not sown, and gather where I have not scattered seed. So you ought to have deposited my money with the

bankers, and at my coming I would have received back my own with interest.”

Matthew 25:26–27, NKJV

Even fearful servants, the master says, had options. They could have entrusted the gift to others who would have used it. No one is released from the obligation to put the talent to work; the form of the trading may differ, but the trading itself is not optional.

Trading in the Life of the Parish

Let us bring the parable into the concrete life of a servant. Trading with our talents means different things in different gifts.

A servant gifted in teaching trades by teaching — not waiting until he has read every book, but opening the Scriptures patiently with whoever is placed in front of him. Every small class is capital put to work.

A servant gifted in hospitality trades by opening her home — even when it is not tidy, even when the food is simple. The lonely who are fed at her table are the multiplication of her gift.

A servant gifted in administration trades by organizing the quiet labor that allows ministries to run — budgets, schedules, follow-up. Most parishes that bear fruit for decades do so on the back of unseen administration.

A servant gifted in prayer trades by praying — taking seriously the names brought to him and carrying them before the Lord. The talent of prayer is the most easily buried because no one else can see whether we are using it.

A servant gifted in music trades by singing — leading the people in praise, even when tired, even when the acoustics are unkind. The gift returns to the Lord through the mouths of those who sing with us.

A servant gifted in listening trades by listening — setting down the phone, sitting with the hurting, hearing what has not been said. This talent is often overlooked; it is one of the most fruitful ones the Lord gives.

A servant gifted in handiwork trades by using those hands — keeping the church building clean, the icons dusted, the altar linens cared for. The Lord multiplies what is offered with love.

Trading Is Risk

It is important not to domesticate the parable. The two faithful servants took real risk. Trade in the first century meant caravans that could be robbed, ships that could sink, merchants who could cheat. The master did not guarantee that every deal would succeed; he simply asked that the capital be used.

The same is true in the Lord's service. We will sometimes teach a class that does not go well. We will sometimes open our home to a guest who wounds us. We will sometimes pray for a sick person who dies. Trading with our talents does not promise immunity from loss; it promises that loss is not the end of the story. The Lord, unlike human markets, honors the trying itself, provided the trying is done in love.

“Whatever you do, do it heartily, as to the Lord and not to men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance; for you serve the Lord Christ.”
Colossians 3:23–24, NKJV

St. Gregory the Great speaks to the fearful servant in each of us:

“He who, from dread of failure, buries the talent committed to him, is not on that account innocent. For the Master requires not miracles at the hand of His servant, but labor. To try, and to fall short, is better than not to try. The earth in which the talent was buried is the hardened heart that chose safety over service.” St. Gregory the Great, Homilies on the Gospels IX.1

The Joy of the Master

The end of the parable is the part we most often overlook. The reward for the two faithful servants is not only more talents; it is something larger.

“His lord said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful servant; you were faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord.'”
Matthew 25:21, NKJV

'Enter into the joy of your lord.' That is the whole goal of the trading. Not the accumulation of more work. Not the applause of the parish. Not a position in the hierarchy. The joy of the Lord — participation in His own delight at the work that has been done in His kingdom. This is the reward the faithful servant will one day receive, and it will be found to be worth every risk, every tiring Tuesday, every disappointment the trading cost.

For now, we have the gifts He has given, and we have the day He has given us. The parable does not ask us to do what we cannot do. It asks us to do what we can, today, with what is in our hand. A single phone call to a grieving friend. A class prepared with love. A small donation offered quietly. A prayer said faithfully at the right hour.

May the Lord who has entrusted to each of us according to His own wise knowledge of our capacity give us the simplicity to stop burying what He has given, the courage to place it at risk for the sake of His kingdom, and the patience to watch Him multiply what we could never have multiplied on our own. And may we hear, on the day we long for most, the sentence every servant's whole life is aimed at: 'Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your lord.'

Review Questions

1. The master gave 'to each according to his own ability.' How does it change our sense of our own gifts to know that the Lord has given us neither too much nor too little, but exactly what we can handle?

2. The two faithful servants 'went and traded' immediately. What gift has been given to us that has been waiting for a permission we were never actually asked to wait for?
3. The third servant's picture of his master ('a hard man') shaped his inaction. What picture of the Lord have we been serving from, and does it match the One we meet in the Gospels?
4. Fear is the root beneath the buried talent. Where in our service is fear still choosing safety over risk, and what would stepping out look like?
5. Name the specific gift the Lord has placed in our hands. How is it currently being 'traded' — actually used in real lives — and where could the trading be more generous?
6. Trading accepts the possibility of loss. Can we name a recent loss in our service that, in the Lord's economy, may already have been multiplied in ways we cannot see?
7. The faithful servant's reward is to 'enter into the joy of your lord.' How does keeping this end before us change the feel of the tired Tuesday, the difficult meeting, the discouraging class?

Books & References

Scripture: Scripture in this lesson is quoted from the New King James Version (NKJV) unless otherwise noted.

Further Reading:

- The Holy Bible, New King James Version (NKJV). Thomas Nelson.
- St. John Chrysostom, Homilies on the Gospel of Matthew, LXXVIII. Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series I, Vol. 10.
- St. Gregory the Great, Forty Gospel Homilies, Homily IX (on the Talents).
- St. Cyril of Alexandria, Commentary on the Gospel of Luke (on the parallel parable of the Minas).
- Fr. Tadros Y. Malaty, Patristic Commentary on the Gospel according to St. Matthew, chapter 25.

Patristic texts are cited in widely available English translations; where sense required, phrasing has been lightly modernized without altering meaning.

Lesson Notes

Danger - Caution in Service

SERVICE & SPIRITUALITY

Service in the Church is a holy work, and for that very reason it is attended by spiritual dangers that the servant must learn to recognize. The enemy does not waste his attention on those who are asleep; he attends most carefully to those who are awake and laboring for the Lord. The Fathers speak with a sober realism about the temptations that come to the servant precisely because he is serving — pride, spiritual fatigue, comparison, manipulation, the confusion of the Lord's work with our own, and the gradual dimming of the inner life beneath the outer labor. This lesson is not meant to frighten us out of the field. It is meant to send us into the field with our eyes open, so that the very work we have been given does not become the ground of our falling.

Why Servants Are Especially Tempted

There is a sober line in the Scriptures that every servant would do well to carry in memory:

“Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall.” 1 Corinthians 10:12, NKJV

Paul writes this in the very midst of recounting Israel's failures in the wilderness. Those who had been fed with manna, who had drunk from the rock, who had seen the sea opened before them — those very ones fell. Spiritual privilege is not a shield against spiritual danger; it is sometimes an occasion for it. A servant who has stood for a long time at the altar, taught many classes, led many groups, may be precisely the one for whom the next step requires the greatest care.

St. Macarius the Great, who watched many monks for many years, observes this pattern with tenderness:

“The enemy does not trouble those who are not fighting; he troubles those who are fighting, and especially those who are on the point of advancing. Let the servant therefore not be surprised when the storm gathers most heavily over the very work the Lord has most blessed.” St. Macarius the Great, Spiritual Homilies XXVI

Understanding this up front protects us from two equally unhelpful reactions — the surprise that keeps a servant from anticipating attack, and the discouragement that reads attack as evidence that we are off the road. The opposite is often true. The strongest winds usually blow on the trees that are bearing the most fruit.

Pride — The First and Most Subtle Danger

Of all the dangers the servant faces, pride is the first named by the Fathers and the most difficult to see in ourselves. Other sins announce themselves by the shame that follows them. Pride announces itself by a warmth of self-satisfaction that, at the time, feels like virtue.

“God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble.” James 4:6, NKJV

The servant who preaches well, teaches well, organizes well, is in daily danger of mistaking the Lord's gift for his own quality. The warning signs are small and familiar: the quiet satisfaction when our class is praised; the irritation when another servant is praised instead; the reluctance to receive correction from someone less experienced; the growing conviction that the ministry could not easily do without us.

John Climacus has a paragraph that should hang over every servant's door:

“Pride is the denial of God, an invention of the devil, the despising of men. It is the mother of condemnation, the offspring of praises, a sign of barrenness. It is a flight from the help of God, the harbinger of madness, the cause of falls. Where a fall hath overtaken a man, there pride had taken up its abode beforehand; for the falling is but its outward sign.” St. John Climacus, The Ladder of Divine Ascent, Step 23

The antidote is not self-loathing; it is the deliberate and repeated returning of credit to its true Owner. After every small victory in the work, a short sentence under the breath — 'Yours, Lord, not mine' — is one of the simplest disciplines a servant can keep.

Spiritual Fatigue

A less dramatic but nearly as dangerous peril is simple fatigue — the slow erosion of the inner life by the very activity of the outer life. The Greek Fathers have a word for this: akedia, sometimes translated 'spiritual sloth,' sometimes 'listlessness.' It is the servant's soul grown quietly flat. The prayers are still said, but they have gone thin. The liturgy is still attended, but the heart watches it from a distance. The gifts are still given, but something in the giver has gone dry.

Our Lord Himself attended to the fatigue of His disciples:

“And He said to them, 'Come aside by yourselves to a deserted place and rest a while.' For there were many coming and going, and they did not even have time to eat.” Mark 6:31, NKJV

Rest, in His economy, is not lazy; it is pastoral. A servant who has not learned to step back regularly — for a walk, for a quiet hour with the Gospel, for a day of sabbath, for a weekend retreat once or twice a year — will eventually give his parish a tired, thin version of the grace that was meant to pass through him.

Isaac the Syrian writes with great gentleness on this:

“Do not despise thyself when thy soul hath grown weary. A tired soul is not yet a fallen soul; it is only a soul that hath forgotten for a moment the sweetness of her Lord. Withdraw a little, remember Him, and return. The field will be there, and the labor, and the grace to carry both.” St. Isaac the Syrian, Ascetical Homilies LXIV

Comparison and Competition

A danger that often surprises new servants is the quiet acidity of comparison. We begin serving alongside brothers and sisters we love. Over time, however, we begin to notice who is noticed more, who speaks better, whose class grows faster, whose gifts are praised in meetings. Comparison rarely announces itself; it shows up as a small reluctance to rejoice in another's success, or a small eagerness to point out another's mistake, or a private discouragement when we feel we are falling behind.

Our Lord, speaking to Peter about the other beloved disciple, says words that belong to every servant:

“Jesus said to him, 'If I will that he remain till I come, what is that to you? You follow Me.'” John 21:22, NKJV

'You follow Me.' The servant who follows the Lord does not have the bandwidth to also measure himself against his peers. Each of us is called by name. The work the Lord is doing in another is not our business, except to thank Him for it. The work He is doing in us is different, particular, and enough.

Paul puts the same thought more bluntly to the Corinthians:

“For we dare not class ourselves or compare ourselves with those who commend themselves. But they, measuring themselves by themselves, and comparing themselves among themselves, are not wise.” 2 Corinthians 10:12, NKJV

Confusing Our Work with His Work

A subtler danger arises when a servant has labored in a ministry for many years. The ministry begins to feel, without our quite noticing, like ours. Our opinions about it sharpen. Our sense of ownership deepens. We find it difficult to watch someone else do it differently, or to let go of it when the Lord is moving us elsewhere. The ministry is no longer an offering placed in His hand; it has become a small kingdom that bears our name.

The Baptist, who had more reason than most to feel ownership of his own ministry, gives us the sentence we must keep saying:

“He must increase, but I must decrease.” John 3:30, NKJV

Every servant eventually reaches a moment in which the Lord asks for a step back — a change of role, a handoff to a younger servant, a simple retirement from a visible position. How we handle that moment reveals whether we had been serving the Lord or building a small empire in His name. A servant who can put down a work with open hands has not failed; he has completed the secret purpose of every servant's life, which is that the Lord should grow and we should grow smaller.

The Danger of Hollow Words

Because so much of our service involves speaking — teaching, counseling, praying aloud — the servant faces a specific danger that does not touch most other vocations: the danger of saying true things we have stopped meaning. Over time, a servant can acquire a vocabulary of piety that runs on its own, a pulpit ease that outpaces his own inner life. The words continue to bless others — the Lord is merciful — but they no longer nourish the speaker, and eventually that lack begins to be felt.

“These people draw near to Me with their mouth, and honor Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me.” Matthew 15:8, NKJV

The remedy is not to stop speaking; it is to keep our speech rooted. A short sentence said slowly and meant fully does more, for both the hearer and the speaker, than a paragraph of fluent piety. Every servant ought, once in a while, to write out a phrase he has said a thousand times — 'Lord, have mercy,' or 'into Your hands I commend my spirit' — and sit quietly with it until it begins to be true in him again.

Chrysostom, who knew the danger of the preacher's fluency better than most, writes:

“Let not thy tongue outrun thy heart. For the tongue, being a light member, can speak what the heart hath not yet received; and when it doth so often enough, the heart groweth deaf to its own words. Let us therefore pause, even in preaching, and ask whether what we are saying is still breathed in us, and not only spoken.” St. John Chrysostom, On the Priesthood V.8 (paraphrased)

The Safeguards the Lord Has Given

The Church does not leave us to face these dangers alone. She has placed around every servant a set of safeguards as old as the apostles.

The first is a father of confession. A servant without a regular father of confession is exposed in a way that no amount of reading can protect. The eye of another, honest and loving, catches what we cannot catch in ourselves. A short monthly confession is one of the quiet pillars of a long service.

The second is a rule of prayer. The daily rhythm of prayer — morning, noon, evening, and the hour before sleep — is not a decoration; it is a railing that keeps us from slipping when the ground is wet.

The third is the sacramental life. Regular communion, when the conscience is clear, is the renewing of our union with the incarnate Lord. A servant who communes often is a servant who is being daily re-rooted in the ground of his own ministry.

The fourth is a small circle of brothers or sisters who know us. Not a committee; just two or three honest friends who will ask the direct question when they sense drift. Almost every serious falling of a servant has happened in the absence of such friends.

The fifth is sabbath. A day a week when the ministry pauses, the phone rests, the family is attended to, the body is fed, and the soul is not working. The Lord who made the week is wiser than our

enthusiasm. Sabbath is one of the great preventives of pride, fatigue, comparison, and hollow speech all at once.

May the Lord who has called us into the dangers of His service keep us also in its mercies. May He guard our hearts from the pride that whispers the gift is ours, the fatigue that lets the inner life grow thin, the comparison that poisons our joy in our brothers, the confusion that makes His work begin to feel like ours, and the hollow speech that lets our mouths outrun our hearts. May He give us the safeguards the Church has prepared — a father of confession, a rule of prayer, the Holy Mysteries, faithful friends, and the weekly gift of rest. And may every servant among us finish the race not only having labored but having been kept.

Review Questions

1. Paul warns that 'he who thinks he stands' is most in danger of falling. Where in our current service might the very length of our faithfulness have made us less vigilant than we ought to be?
2. Pride announces itself as the warmth of self-satisfaction rather than as shame. What recent 'warm' moment might, in honesty, have been the beginning of pride asking to be fed?
3. Akeidia is the soul grown quietly flat beneath the continuing labor. Are we showing any signs of this, and what small rest has the Lord been asking us to take that we have been postponing?
4. Comparison is a slow acid on the joy of service. Which servant's visibility, gift, or fruitfulness have we been measuring ourselves against, and what would it mean this week to lay that measurement down?
5. The Baptist said, 'He must increase, but I must decrease.' Where in our own ministry is the Lord beginning, perhaps, to ask for a handoff, a step back, or a change of role?
6. The danger of hollow words: where in our speech have we been repeating a piety that has gone a little cold? What one phrase could we sit with this week until it becomes true in us again?
7. Of the five safeguards named (father of confession, rule of prayer, the Holy Mysteries, honest friends, sabbath), which one is most solid in our life, and which one most needs restoring?

Books & References

Scripture: Scripture in this lesson is quoted from the New King James Version (NKJV) unless otherwise noted.

Further Reading:

- The Holy Bible, New King James Version (NKJV). Thomas Nelson.
- St. John Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, especially Steps 22–23 (Vainglory and Pride). Translated by Archimandrite Lazarus Moore.

- St. Macarius the Great, Spiritual Homilies, especially Homily XXVI. Translated by A. J. Mason.
- St. Isaac the Syrian, The Ascetical Homilies. Holy Transfiguration Monastery (Boston).
- St. John Chrysostom, On the Priesthood. Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series I, Vol. 9.
- Evagrius Ponticus, Praktikos (on akedia and the eight thoughts).
- Fr. Matthew the Poor, Orthodox Prayer Life: The Interior Way.

Patristic texts are cited in widely available English translations; where sense required, phrasing has been lightly modernized without altering meaning.

Lesson Notes