

# The Church of Saint Pascal Baylon

Fr. Mike Byron, Pastor: Sunday Homily

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Among the duties that my mother always assumed in her role of raising us kids was the duty of keeping us appropriately humble, making sure we never got too full of ourselves, and she was good at it. In keeping with that responsibility, I remember her first remarks after the commencement ceremony on the day I received my doctoral degree in theology. She recalled a comment that I had made to her back when I was in middle school and had brought home a very mediocre report card at the end of the term. There were a couple of decent grades, but several that weren't so good. As usual, the good grades were completely passed over and Mom wanted an accounting for why the other ones weren't better. My response was to say, "Mom, you're just going to have to get used to the fact that I'm not very smart." Even now I have to admit that was a pretty clever comeback. Unfortunately, she didn't buy it and she doubled down on me to shape up in my studies.

In truth, I think we both knew that I wasn't so much a bad student as I was a lazy one. She knew better than I just of what I was capable, and she wasn't going to allow me to settle for something less than my best. I didn't like that because it meant that I needed to work much harder and what kid wants to do that? She also appreciated *far* better than I did just exactly what was at stake in my success or failure in school. When you're 13 years old you can't very well understand how the choices you make now carry forward for the rest of your life. In middle school the future seems so far away and not much needing to be thought about. My Mom knew better, which is why she just *had* to remind me of all that on graduation day.

And although she never said so, I have to think that another motive for her insistence is that in some way, *my* achievements were a reflection of *hers*. She was, as they say in Boston, "wicked smart," and I was her son, of whom she would wish to be proud for being my best. The suggestion that I just wasn't very bright would have been, as I now realize, insulting to her but easier for me.

And remembering all that helps me to step in more easily to today's gospel parable of Jesus concerning the master and his entrusting his wealth to his three servants. We are told that each man was given a specific amount of the master's money "to each according to his ability." In other words, it wasn't an accident that the one who was given five talents was entrusted with more. He was *expected* to produce more because he *could*. And the same for the man that was given two talents, and the man who was given one. The master knew these servants enough to understand that they didn't all have the same wherewithall to deal skillfully with the money, and he wouldn't expect that. But what *was* expected—in fact demanded—of all of them is that they made their best effort to do what they could for the sake of the master. Two of them did exactly that. The third one didn't even try: "Master, I was afraid, so I buried it." "Mom, you're just going to have to admit that I can't do it."

That's a completely unacceptable response to the gifts that were given. In both my case in school and in this parable, the response of the lazy guy was to suggest that we should lower the bar of expectations and not work so hard. That's an easy out, but it also suggests that that guy has no idea what's at stake here. And it also helps to explain this extremely harsh response from the master in this parable. It's as if to say, "You don't get to determine what I ought to expect from you. I know of what you are capable. I knew I couldn't count on you to produce as great as a return as the others. That's why I gave you the *one* talent. But I expected *something*, and you didn't even provide *that*." That lazy servant seems to have believed that there wasn't much harm in deciding to do nothing while the master was away. The master saw it quite differently.

This whole section of the gospel of Matthew speaks of Jesus teaching about the end of the world, the Day of the Lord, and as we will hear next week, the Great and Final Judgement of God. It is a wake-up call for us to

remember exactly what is at stake in the life choices we make while we await the Lord's return. And to those of us who are tempted to think that the stakes aren't really so great, and the end of time is too far ahead to worry about, and it doesn't much matter how hard I try to fulfill the responsibilities of Christian discipleship that God entrusted to me, this parable should be particularly alarming.

It was never Jesus' way to scare or threaten his followers into being responsible in their day-to-day work as disciples. But at the same time, he regularly pointed out what was at stake in a decision to come along with his mission or not. In last week's gospel, when the wedding banquet doors were locked; and in this week's gospel, when the useless servant is cast out into the darkness; and in next week's gospel when we will hear of the slackers being consigned to eternal punishment; the message is the same and it is weighty: There is an urgency to doing our best, with the talents we have, to bringing about the Kingdom of God here and now. And the very worst thing we could do in the face of that responsibility is to decide that my role doesn't much matter—to bury the money, to lower the bar, and to simply accept the world as it is.

It is *God* who gets to determine the importance of how we use our gifts, and he *has*. And we don't get to say, "I'm too afraid," or "It's too hard," or even, "It doesn't matter." The servant was not free to bury the talent in a hole, even if he *thought* he was. Because it wasn't his money. I was not free to excuse myself from studying in school, even if I wished I was. Because my abilities didn't come from me alone, and they weren't and aren't intended for my benefit alone.

As the Day of the Master's Return comes closer, we don't all have to be busy about the same tools or with the same degree of apparent success, but we had *all* better be busy.