

As kids, Dad used his military background to give Mom a hand. Every day we made our beds and cleaned our rooms before school. If we did what was expected, we received our full allowance.

Every group has expectations for each member of that group. It is the same whether a family, business, sports team, nation, or even a congregation. A surgeon might be awesome, but without nurses, anesthesiologists, and technicians, he or she can do nothing. Everyone needs pitch in for a family to function and a baseball team cannot win with only pitchers. Anytime one fails in their role, everyone feels the pain.

What are expectations expected of you, and what expectations do you have of others around you? Jesus had such issues in mind as he told a story about a farm. It went like this: Once upon a time, a farmer had so many fields he rented out various parcels to different farmers. Each was to pay rent but would keep the profits for himself. Everyone would benefit. As the owner had other businesses, he hired a manager to keep track of this farm, and gather the rent, which was a portion of the crop that was produced.

The manager would never have been hired if not capable. For whatever reason he didn't do his job. The owner discovered the manager's failure as no rents had been collected and no bills had been paid. He fired the manager and asked for all records, the only appropriate response.

Feeling he had nothing to lose, the manager selfishly decided to cook the books. He contacted each renter saying, "pay whatever you want." That reclaimed some income, but the real purpose was to make each renter indebted to the unemployed manager. He hoped his actions would entice someone to give him a job in return. He was still fired and now the owner had been cheated twice. First, by the manager not doing his job, and secondly by the renters not paying the full value of what they owed. (Sometimes the coverup is worse than the crime!)

There are obvious practical lessons in this story, but what does it have to do faith or daily living? The prophet Amos gives a clue. Amos preached to people who used religion as a badge of honor, like a get out of jail free card, excusing them from any but the bare minimums of faith. They talked a good game, but they often failed to live what they believed.

Amos said they were mocking God, acting no differently than the heathen and atheists. He said they pretended to keep God's law by showing up for worship, while inwardly figuring out who they could cheat in the next business deal when everyone was back to work. They were being more selfish than faithful. He said

they knew the laws by heart, but their hearts had no love or compassion in their daily living.

Many were expert at rationalizing how they could ignore words of God what didn't match their own desires. Amos correctly diagnosed their disease as selfish living which was more important than seeking to serve God and neighbor. He watched as they kept more than needed and shared only what was of no use to them. Blessings were being wasted.

In another familiar parable Jesus told how a younger son squandered his father's inheritance. He used the same word "squander" in this parable to talk about how this manager wasted his gifts and disappointed the owner. These parables were told with the intent of making listeners assess what gifts they had been blessed with and evaluate how they were being used.

This is where it gets up close and personal for us! Whether we apply this to family, vocation, school, sports, passions, or interests, the message is the same! We are God's children. God blesses us richly with unique opportunities and gifts. Such blessings have the potential to change the lives of neighbors, bring us closer to God, and reveal the glory of his love.

It is easy to criticize politicians, business leaders, entertainers, athletes (or people we don't like) for claiming to be people of faith in public but ignoring a life of faith, when they are out of the spotlight. These parables are like mirrors that force us to face the same reality in our own lives.

Jesus' message is simple. We are called to be disciples, not only when it is convenient or self-serving, *but in every moment of our lives*. We live in God's time, on God's earth, and are equipped with God's gifts. Life is first of all not about me, but about the God who loves me. And because of that love, our living should reflect God rather than me!

Life is a gift of God that brings us into his family. Baptism celebrates and assures us a place in the family business. Each has a role to play in serving God and neighbor, in every moment of every day!

Should we act the part only in Sunday worship, we have missed the point. If we live daily without Christ being the motivation of our lifestyles, we have wasted the gift of faith. In such moments, like selfish managers, we are stealing from God and neighbor alike. That is plain to understand.

Jesus modeled our response by his life. He could have been selfish, taking the easy way out, without suffering and dying. He could have found less painful ways to keep his name as a storyteller and healer in the limelight. However, if he had not completed his ministry by accepting the suffering and pain of the cross and the darkness of the tomb, he could not have completed his mission, leaving

us high, dry, and dead. That would have cheated heaven and earth alike. But his love motivated the gift of his life!

His gift of forgiveness allows us to try again when we fail. We must never assume discipleship is optional or stewardship is only for a few. We have been set free in order to manage our gifts and opportunities as blessings from a loving God, which they are. And gifts are meant to be shared!

With privilege comes responsibility. Much as we would like to make excuses, God never does that to us. The only strings attached to every part of our lives have a tag saying, "For you, Love, God!"

Just as a ruler shows where to draw the line, how far we have come, and how far we can go, this parable reminds of the responsibility of Baptism's CALL! Anything less squanders our Father's wealth.

Worship is not what we do in a special place one day a week, but how we live our lives. Faith is not something we cling to when we are desperate, but a gift that flavors every action of life.

Remember, it isn't what we do that brings us to Christ. But having been brought to Christ what we do shows how we value such grace. Discipleship is about managing rather than squandering our Father's gifts. It is all about being part of a thriving, loving, family business!