

*“Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom his lord has set over his household, to give them their food in due season? Blessed is that servant whom his lord finds doing so when he comes. Most certainly I tell you that he will set him over all that he has. But if that evil servant should say in his heart, ‘My lord is delaying his coming, and begins to beat his fellow servants, and eat and drink with the drunkards, the lord of that servant will come in a day when he doesn’t expect it, and in an hour when he doesn’t know it, and will cut him in pieces, and appoint his portion with the hypocrites. That is where the weeping and grinding of teeth will be.*

Reading the story about the evil servant cause me to start thinking about the people I have worked for along the way. Supervisors and managers can be a mixed bag can't they? Of course they are responsible to someone else and ultimately their orders come from the director or the COO or CEO and they are supposed to make the work go smoothly and hopefully keep the employees happy under the umbrella of those big-picture orders. If you've been in that position, you know that it can be a pretty significant juggling match.

Do you remember those guys on the variety shows who spun the plates on sticks? The sticks were anchored on the floor and they would put a plate on top of one and spin—and the plate would stay up there as long as it was spinning. Then they would do another and another—then they had to go back to the first one and keep it going and then the next and then go start another and then back to spin up the third one and fourth one—then go start another. Of course eventually the first one spun down and fell because there were too many plates to keep them all spinning. Then the next and the next.

A good manager can keep several plates spinning at the same time.

Maybe you've had a bad supervisor along the way. I've had both good and bad. The good was a man who came through the ranks and knew that giving freedom and flexibility created loyalty and he even got extra work—and especially important were the creative solutions to problems. What he cared about was that the work was done and done well and done on time.

A guy named Ronnie replaced him. He got the job because he was politically connected. His “get to know you” session was full of accusations and yelling and a promise the he was going to straighten us out if it was the last thing he did. There would be no more rule-breaking and no flexibility and I was clear the thing he wanted to do most of all was fire someone.

Well, of course people quit doing extra work and quit being loyal to a fault, so morale went down and work slowed. Ultimately HE was the one who got caught breaking the rules—after all he WAS the boss—and HE was the one who lost his job. THAT was the last thing he did, as our boss anyway :)

Anyway, the story of the evil servant reminded me of working for Ronnie. He was put into a position of responsibility and of honor—and then failed to live up to the requirements. Ultimately he paid the price with his job. Of course that wasn't as bad as the price the evil servant paid. At first read, it almost seems like the servant was drawn and quartered or something like that. I certainly hope that part is figurative—but we will look at that in a bit.

In a real sense, this passage is one of those I call a “hard teaching.” It is in the Bible and it is pretty clear and understandable, but it is hard to think it is literal and that God means it.

We are still looking at the Gospels from the time just before Jesus' arrest and his trial and his crucifixion. His actions and his words give us some clues as to what he considered important—the loose ends he wanted to tie up with his words and his work. He was going away and there were things that needed to be done and things that needed to be understood if the Good News was going to spread and grow and change the world.

As far as direct context goes, this teaching follows a discourse on the second coming of Jesus. He had described the times and he had described the circumstances and he had warned of the consequences of not being ready. Just before this passage, he said that if the strongman had known the thief was coming he would have been ready for him. In the Luke version of this discourse, Peter asked, “are you talking to everyone, or just the disciples?” But instead of answering Peter, Jesus tells this story of power corrupted and punishment given.

You've heard of “preaching to the choir” right? Since we don't actually have a choir up here, the next best thing I can do is “preach to the pulpit” don't you think?

And I will. As we go through these verses, I am going to apply the story to myself and other church leaders. In a very real sense, you could say that I am a lowly, common servant who (along with your other church leaders) has been put in charge of this “household” by the lord of the house.

It certainly applies to me and it certainly applies to the other church leaders. Pastors and Deacons and Elders and teachers and leaders have responsibilities given by God—the lord of the house. We must never fail to serve the community of God and the community around us. We must never fail to give meat to the hungry and comfort to the sick. We must never fail to serve God and the children of God.

Because Jesus says that the master will return one day and he will want to look at our books—the record of our faithfulness to him—to see how we spent his money and how we spent his time and how we spent his talents.

Notice in this passage that the unwise or evil servant placed his will and his wishes and his pleasure over the master's best interests. Early on he may have done the right thing, but as the master tarried longer and longer he decided that there would be plenty of time to put things right—so why worry? Have some fun and go on a little power trip. After all, he was good enough to be left in charge, right?

So, from my standpoint, if I am a proper servant of God in this place I will not smite you and I will not be corrupted by the world around us and I will not assume authority that is not mine to assume.

Proper authority is always exercised under the will and the authority of the master—period and end of story. A wise servant works to exercise the will and the wishes of the master. He doesn't become a glutton and a drunkard.

In the writings of Paul we are told that a faithful minister of the Gospel should be paid for their efforts—but I'm imagining that a wise and faithful servant won't get rich from that servant-hood. I guess I can never expect to own a mansion in an exclusive neighborhood or a fleet of fancy cars or a Rolex President watch. I like nice things, but I don't want to go too far and be like the servant. He wasted the master's resources and the master's money for his own good pleasure.

And when this evil servant was asleep, the master returned. We church and its ministers and leaders should never be complacent and ho-hum and unfaithful to the tasks God has given us—because the day of accounting will come sooner than we think.

In verse 45 Jesus asks a question of Peter. “Who is a just and faithful servant?” Then he explains. A faithful and just servant is one who does as he or she is told. When put in charge, she does as the master would. He acts in good faith, trying to make the decisions the master would make.

She makes sure the others do their work and that they are rewarded for their efforts--”he gives them meat in due season.” Maybe it was literally meat or a measure of wheat or barley or just provision and livelihood. In those days a certain amount of provision was allotted for each person. A head servant would be put in charge of other servants and their meat or provision.

Let me point out something. The servant who was in charge was also a servant. No different than the others. No better or worse. Maybe he was a slave just as they were or maybe they were all paid hands. This servant was simply given a job because the master thinks he has the talents and abilities to do it and do it well.

The word servant can also be translated steward. A person put in a leadership position by the master is to be a good steward of the talents and abilities and resources and authority given by the master. The pastor is to be a good steward of the Word of God. The pastor is to distribute MEAT not a thin gruel of cornmeal and water. Elders and deacons are to be good stewards also—as are Sunday School teachers and other leaders. We are to take the resources the master has given and make the best of them and the most of them for the sake of the household—or the Kingdom of God.

The Bible says “blessed are we whom the master finds doing this.” We are the wise and faithful servants if we are caught doing the right thing and doing our best with what we have been given.

If we do well, there are rewards. Verse 47 says that the good servant will rule over all the master's goods. The term brings to mind Joseph's position in Egypt when the Pharaoh put him over the country for the sake of storing up food for the coming famine. He had a position of power and honor and responsibility.

The Bible says that those who are faithful will rule with Jesus forever...what a reward that is.

Ahhhh—but let's not forget the punishment for not being faithful. I don't want to think about that, do you? Well, there in one main characteristic shown us in the rest of the passage—and I suggest that we seek to avoid that.

The evil servant is forgetful. I don't mean he is scatter-brained like me or forgetful like we sometimes get when we get older. What he forgot was that he is also just a servant. And even though he knows that the master will return some day and seek a reckoning, in a PRACTICAL sense he has forgotten that the master will return. After a while he got in his mind that it would be so far in the future that he didn't have to worry about it.

He says, “my lord is long in coming...” but in reality that lord isn't even his lord at all—he is his own lord and he is doing his own will.

I fear for some of us church leaders—that in the many years that Jesus has delayed his return we have forgotten that it will come and that it is real and that some day there WILL be a reckoning. I fear that some of us are seeking our own direction and our own will.

Woe to the leaders who forget their servant-hood. Woe to the pastor who calls Jesus lord with his or her mouth and calls themselves lord in their own heart.

The last couple of verses talk about punishment for the evil servant. I like the rewards better, don't you? Ruling with Jesus?

I said we would talk about the “cutting to pieces” part but I'm not going to dwell on it. The term seems to literally mean “separate him from himself” and that could mean literally and it could mean figuratively—like separating him from his place of honor and taking away his responsibilities. Whatever it is, it will be a time of sadness and pain—literally weeping and gnashing of teeth.

So, church leaders, did I scare you a bit? Did JESUS scare you a bit—he scared me a bit, I can tell you. That is one reason I sit here quietly on Sunday mornings—because of the awesome responsibility of trying to speak for God.

OK—I've preached to the pulpit today and to an extent to the board and other leaders.

Here comes the but, right?

We've heard cautions for leaders, but I hope the rest of you have kept an ear open for how else it might apply. It also applies to any of us who have been given talents and goods and responsibilities by God for spreading the Gospel and for maintaining this body of Christ.

So—maybe you could say that this passage is about stewardship of what God has given and being responsible to God for our actions. Money. Time. Talents. Goods. Everything we have. Each child of God is on the hook here.

The new church year is coming. The nominating committee is working and seeking those who would lead and work to maintain and grow this community of God.

Please be a wise servant and listen as God seeks to give you responsibilities—responsibilities based on your abilities and talents and your faithfulness.

As God leads, please respond as we sing.