

“Why Much Is Required”

a sermon by

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First Presbyterian Church
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Scripture: Luke 12: 35 -48

Text: *“From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required, and to those to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be entrusted.”*

Luke 12:48

This may come as a shock, but I love this text. I would venture to make a guess that many of you here this morning knew the end of this passage – Jesus’ word that to those whom much has been given, much will be required. What everyone forgets is what comes just before this – a very clear and powerful, downright disturbing to some degree, parable about what happens when you have been given a job to do by the master of the universe and you have done nothing.

Since you have all heard the, “we make Jesus too nice in the modern world sermon,” before, and since I have delivered it a time or two, I’ll not go down that road except to say that we have tried until we are blue in the face in the church to make Jesus nicer than he probably was. Did Jesus love everybody? Yes – without a doubt. Did he most likely receive a high mark in his “Tough Love 101” class, the class where you are taught to love someone enough to tell them the truth? I think he got the highest score in history.

What we have here in Luke 12 is one of Jesus’ tough love sermons. Peter feels it coming doesn’t he? Do you remember the time when your mom and dad sat the family down, or the grandparents got all the cousins together to talk about an issue, and one of the older kids said, “Mom is this for everybody or just the little kids in the house?” They asked the question because

they knew it wasn't going to be good news, and if it were good news it would be news that acted and tasted like cough syrup. Yes, Peter sees it coming, "Lord, is this for us or everybody?"

I remember when one of my relatives would speak this way, and they would never answer the question. They would just keep on talking, as if to say that if it is important enough to say then it ought to be heard by everyone. But everyone here is actually a pretty specific whole. Namely, this is a parable for and about the church.

In this parable, Jesus is the master. The church is the slave. And as the head of the church, the owner of the ranch, Jesus has it in his mind that his charges are going to do their parts, each and every one of us. In fact, Jesus ends the whole parable, the whole discourse with the powerful idea that he intends to enforce a standard of review that will demand we give in proportion to how we have received. What we have here in these words of Jesus is, in a most fascinating way, invitation and warning at the same time.

This is typical of Luke's Jesus. Jesus, in Luke, is a prophet who calls his followers to life in the prophetic key – with all the hazards and pitfalls that such a life might entail. Luke Timothy Johnson, a New Testament scholar in Atlanta, writes these words in his introduction to Luke's gospel: "In Luke, Jesus calls his followers to a participation in his own prophetic ministry. They, like him, must be willing to face the suffering that such boldness in word and deed involves."¹

It is, after all, hard to be a prophet. Hard to tell the truth that needs to be told. Prophecy has less to do with predicting the future than it has to do with describing a need in the world, and professing that God will somehow meet that need. And then, guaranteeing God's participation on faith and faith alone. That's what Jesus does here. Invites us into the ministry while saying that on faith, he is coming back just as a master will return after a period of absence. And, just like a master does, he will leave his slaves, his servants, in charge while he is gone.

What does that mean then? What is it that you and I are supposed to be doing while we are "in charge?" From where I stand, it seems that the church has two main tasks that have thousands of manifestations and hundreds of moving parts. The first task is that we are to be doers of Jesus' mission – love for neighbor, care for the poor and marginalized, standing for justice. The second is that we are to be keepers of and witnesses to His faith – the faith of Jesus and the faith about Jesus.

So, we must ask ourselves whether or not we feel like we are doing a good job of watching the place while the master of the house is gone. Well, for starters, let's admit that having some control and being in charge is a tricky task to pull off. I remember very well when the teacher would have to leave the classroom for a few moments back in elementary school. In south Mississippi the teachers usually picked one of about three girls in my class to be "in charge" while she was gone. The "in charge" person's job was basically to take names and make sure we didn't get too loud. Well, it was only a matter of time before the other boys and I collectively discovered that, if we were all bad at once, it would be too much for the "in charge"

¹ Luke Timothy Johnson. "Living Jesus." Page 175

girl to process. While she was writing down one name, three or four more of us could be doing something else that we weren't suppose to be doing. If everybody started talking all at once then the "in charge" girl couldn't possibly get the room quiet. It was a game that turned into an untenable situation – a situation where the whole ended up punished. Punished, it turned out, because the task was too large for only one to carry out and the expectations were unrealistic that one little girl could have kept a pack of wolves like us in line.

The church, I am afraid, is a little like that. We have been given a huge job by Jesus, just like that little girl back in school. And he has left us completely in charge to self-police ourselves to a great degree – just like that little girl. The job is hard. So is the self-policing.

And here is where I want to focus our attention and give, in this final Sunday Sermon, a report card about us in a few brief statements. As a service church, I am proud to say, First Presbyterian is in good stead. While I do not want to speak for Jesus as though I am his official spokesperson, on the mission side, I would say that he is well pleased with our work here, and indeed with most of the Presbyterian Church.

On the faith side, though, I wonder what he thinks of us. Scripture and the Reformed Tradition have been univocal in their admonition that the grace of God is experienced in our faith – faith in Jesus as Lord. We are not joined from east to west and north to south by language, or gender, or politics, or perspective. We are joined by faith. This is our common bond. Faith, as a gift of grace, is the greatest gift of all and the first and final requirement of the church – membership, participation, the whole thing. When Jesus said he was the Alpha and Omega, he was not just talking about the beginning and end of time. He was declaring that he was also the beginning and the ending, simultaneously of our faith. The church's one foundation, the hymn declares, is Jesus Christ her Lord, and it says this with good reason.

Let me see if I can put this another way. When people ask you about your church, what do you tell them? Do you tell them about the kind of things that we do: children's ministry, mission trips, outreach, Habitat, Bible Study? Or, when they ask you about your church, do you tell them about what we believe, how we worship and why we worship in such a way, what Christians think about heaven, what we say about sin and forgiveness, why we believe that something sacred happens in the washing of the waters of baptism and in the serving of the bread and cup?

Our faith in Jesus Christ is a gift, and it has been given to you and me. Too often we are quick to take Jesus final word there at Luke 12:48 and equate the "much" in the phrase, *From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required*, with material and financial wealth. I do not think that this is what Jesus is talking about. This is not a money text. Jesus is talking about spiritual wealth – the overflowing treasure, the alpha and omega, beginning and ending, breaking down the gates of hell and death work that he is doing on behalf of the church and for the sake of world.

Yes, the pulpit at Columbia Seminary – the one that says under the pew Bible – "That They May See Jesus" – is a powerful illustration indeed. For the purpose of the church, the

purpose of our ministry and our preaching is that the world may see Jesus. We are not a social club. We are not a discussion group. This is not a place to come for us to feel better about our self-destructive habits. No, we are the servants of Christ, and Jesus expects us to serve Him through the witness of our mission and the veracity of our faith. And this service is His gift to us. Service to Him is His gift to us. And like every gift that you receive, it is yours to open and wear for the world to see, or you can leave it under the tree and wonder how beautiful life could be if you only had the courage to rip open the box and get beyond the admiration of the bow.

If the First Presbyterian Church is to continue to be for Christ in the Heart of Charlotte, this congregation must continue to open the box labeled Jesus and be serious about its evangelism: that word and that practice that makes us squirm in our seats. Right now, most of you are wondering like Peter, is he talking to me, or everybody else? Well, I am talking to us all. For the identity of the church must be its witness to Christ. Now, I am not suggesting that we all take on street preaching, but I am saying that if you haven't invited someone to church recently, if you haven't told someone you'd be praying for them, if you haven't yourself gone to a bible study and invited a friend, if you haven't gotten into a friendly argument about God, or told your child your faith story in the recent past, then these words of Luke are speaking to you. And if you do, do all of those things, then know that they are speaking to you as well – for from you even more is expected. It's a hard standard. But a joyful one, for faith in Jesus Christ, and service in his name is a gift of God indeed. A gift that must be shared for the sake of the church and the sake of world

Finally, there is an old adage that goes something like, "Shepherds don't make sheep, sheep make sheep." This is the key to church vitality and church growth. It is the key to the future of First Presbyterian Church, Charlotte. And I like it. I like it because it sounds like something that either my relatives in Louisiana, or someone in my new congregation in Tarboro, might say. I also like it because it is true. Jesus wasn't just talking to the disciples or just to the leaders, he was talking to them all, everyone that could hear him and everyone that could listen. Keeping watch over His church is everyone's job, and like most jobs, despite its headaches, at its core it is a privilege to have it. It is a joy to be His witness and his servant. The old spiritual goes, "No storm can shake my inmost heart, while to the rock I'm clinging. Since the Lord is the Lord of heaven and earth, how can I keep from singing?" It is impossible to keep from singing once the grace of Christ has claimed our lives. His grace is the most amazing thing in the world. Nothing else has ever, nor will ever, come close. And, that, my dear friends, is why so very much is required.