

# What gives life real meaning and purpose?

*Tough Questions, Part 3*

Luke 19:11-27

John Tucker, Milford Baptist Church, 14 May 2006

## Monday morning

Tomorrow it's Monday. Do you look forward to Mondays? Most people find Monday mornings depressing. In fact, a team of doctors and psychiatrists recently completed a study on the subject. They found that there is a higher chance of having a heart attack on Monday than any other day of the week. This is not merely the result of overindulging in the weekend. The incident of every other kind of stress-related condition is higher on Mondays too. Your blood pressure is elevated on Mondays, meaning you have a higher risk of a stroke. Your stomach acidity will be higher, which means you have a higher risk of having an ulcer. You are twice as likely to commit suicide on a Monday as on any other day. The Monday morning mood is no myth. It's medical fact that many – if not most – of us find our work a little depressing. Whether we're a mother or a lawyer, a student or a retiree, the prospect of facing another week doesn't often excite us. Why is that? Tony Hancock was a comedian in the 1950s and 1960s. In his last TV monologue in 1964 this is what he said:

What have you achieved? What have you achieved? You lost your chance, me old son. You contributed absolutely nothing to this life. A waste of time you being here at all. No place for you in Westminster Abbey. The best you can expect is a few daffodils in a jam jar and a black stone bearing the legend, "He came, and he went." And in between? Nothing. Nobody will even notice you're not here. After about a year somebody might say down at the pub, "Where's old Hancock? I haven't seen him around here lately" "Oh, he's dead, you know." "Is he?" A right *raison d'être*, that is.

The real tragedy is that a couple of years after he spoke these words, Tony Hancock committed suicide. He took his own life. He really did feel that he had nothing to live for. No purpose, no direction. Isn't that what really underlies the Monday morning mood. It's not so much the pressures or stresses of work itself, but the sense that our work – our week, our life – doesn't really have much lasting significance. Throughout the month of May we're looking at a series of *Tough Questions*. Would a loving God send people to hell? Why are there so many hypocrites in the church? Maybe the toughest question of all is this: What gives life real meaning and purpose? To try to answer that question, let's look again this morning at one of the little parables that Jesus tells in the gospel of Luke. This one is found in Luke 19:12-27. Open a Bible and we'll walk through it together.

Luke sets the scene in v 11. He explains that Jesus tells this parable "because he was near Jerusalem and the people thought that the kingdom of God was going to appear at once." Jesus had been travelling slowly and deliberately towards the capital city of Jerusalem for some months. There's a growing sense that when he gets there something dramatic is going to happen. People think he's going to proclaim himself the Messiah, overthrow all Israel's enemies, and establish his kingdom, the kingdom of God. So Jesus tells them this story to explain that, like this nobleman, he will be crowned king. But he has a long journey to undertake before he can assume the throne. He must leave this world altogether. And only on his return will his kingdom be fully established. In the meantime he is leaving to his servants a task. He says, I want you to work for me "until I come back." This is Jesus' antidote to Monday morning syndrome. We have a purpose to live for. We have something to look forward to. The question is: How will we respond? Jesus says that we divide ourselves into three broad categories, depending on how we respond to this challenge.

## Rebellious subjects (19:14,27)

At one extreme are those who identify themselves as rebels. Verse 14: "But his subjects hated him and sent a delegation after him to say, 'We don't want this man to be our king.'" Jesus' fellow countrymen would relate very easily to that scenario. Just a few years before, after the death of King Herod the Great, his son, Archelaus, traveled to Rome to ask Caesar Augustus to make him king. But Archelaus was not popular among the Jews, so they sent a delegation of fifty men to Rome oppose his appointment. Jesus is saying that in much the same way people would reject God's Messiah, too. I remember a Christian evangelist debating with a bunch of university students, responding to their objections and questions. Then he asked them a question: "If I could answer every single one of your questions to your satisfaction, would you surrender control of your life to Jesus?" "No," they said, "we wouldn't." For most people, the root of their resistance to Jesus' rule is not intellectual, but moral. It lies not in the mind, but the will: "We don't *want* this man to be our king."

But their resistance is in vain. The text says in v 15: "He was made king, however, and returned home." At the very end of this parable, Jesus tells us what fate will befall these rebels (v 27): "But those enemies of mine who did not want me to be king over them – bring them here and kill them in front of me." I imagine that, like me, you'd rather

Jesus had left out this verse. It's so harsh. But by it Jesus is simply conveying the hard truth that if we do not want this king, then we cannot have a role in his kingdom. Indeed, we wouldn't be happy in his kingdom. There can be no room in heaven for rebels. It was rebellion against God that ruined this world in the first place. God is not going to let his new world suffer the same fate. Heaven will be populated only by those who acknowledge and desire his rule, who pray, "Your kingdom come, your will be done" (Matt 6:10). Those who aren't willing to pray such a prayer exclude themselves from it.

### **Good servants (19:15-19)**

A second category of people, at the other extreme, are those who Jesus called in this parable the "good servants."

15"He was made king, however, and returned home. Then he sent for the servants to whom he had given the money, in order to find out what they had gained with it. 16"The first one came and said, 'Sir, your mina has earned ten more.' 17" 'Well done, my good servant!' his master replied. 'Because you have been trustworthy in a very small matter, take charge of ten cities.'

What do you think that mina symbolises? Some have suggested it is a symbol for the Holy Spirit. Others say it symbolises the gospel message. Still others say it stands for the natural talents or spiritual gifts or material resources that he gives to each of us. I suppose the answer is that it can be all of those things. The minas represents whatever Jesus has left with us in his absence.

In the same way, the cities that are placed under the servant's jurisdiction as a reward for faithfulness are also clearly symbolic. Jesus is not saying that heaven will be territorially parcelled out as if he were King Henry VIII awarding political favours to his loyal servants. The cities in this parable simply stand for the fact that the use we make of our resources and opportunities now, while we're waiting for our Master's return, can have and will have enormous consequences, eternal consequences. Jesus is saying that it is possible to live our lives now in such a way that what we achieve lasts forever. That is good news in a world of Monday morning depression. Every moment of our lives, every conversation, every task – no matter how mundane – has eternal significance. It reminds me of the story of three men on a building site. They're asked what they're doing. The first man replies unimaginatively "I'm breaking rocks." The second man replies rather more thoughtfully, "I'm earning money to feed my wife and kids." But the third man says, "I'm building a cathedral." It makes all the difference to have a goal, in our case an eternal goal.

So what is your mina? What has the Master given you that you need to invest in the kingdom? Maybe you've got money. John Wesley wrote that Christians have just three rules to follow regarding material possessions: "Make all you can. Save all you can. Give all you can." Someone else wrote: "Apparently Christians in the West have decided that two out of three ain't bad." You could make a secret, sacrificial gift this week. That's an eternal investment. Maybe you've got talents, abilities, time. You can get up on Monday, do your work, eat your dinner, watch TV, get old and die. Or you can take every moment and say, "Jesus, this is yours." You can take every task, every conversation, every relationship, and make it an expression of his character, an eternal investment in his kingdom. Why wouldn't you?

### **Wicked servants (19:20-26)**

That brings us to a third possible response to the coming kingdom, that of the wicked servant:

20"Then another servant came and said, 'Sir, here is your mina; I have kept it laid away in a piece of cloth. 21I was afraid of you, because you are a hard man. You take out what you did not put in and reap what you did not sow.'

He's saying that fear held him back. Fear can do that. I was reading this week about the explorer, Christopher Columbus. Do you know why he was the first explorer to discover the New World? According to one expert, the answer is that all the sailors who set out from Spain and Portugal before him, looking for America, were so afraid of falling off the edge of the earth that they had always kept the continent of Europe just in view. Fear held them back. It's often fear that holds us back from obeying God's commands. When I look at the sin in my life, underneath most of it is fear. I'm afraid that if I risk obeying God, he won't take care of me. For example, I sense God nudging me to lovingly approach someone who has hurt or wronged me and seek reconciliation. But it could all blow up in my face. So I choose to hold back and disobey God's Spirit. But Jesus is adamant: If we want to be trustworthy servants, it'll mean acting in the face of our fears. Taking risks. Are you taking any risks that require a power greater than your own? I actually wonder, though, if there wasn't another factor behind this servant's disobedience. Look at how the Master responds to his excuse:

22'I will judge you by your own words, you wicked servant! You knew, did you, that I am a hard man, taking out what I did not put in, and reaping what I did not sow? 23Why then didn't you put my money on deposit, so that when I came back, I could have collected it with interest?'

There would have been no real risk with that. So this servant's problem was not really fear at all. It was something else. Maybe it was a sense of inadequacy, that he could never really do anything with just one mina. Maybe he felt that circumstances or people around him made it difficult or impossible for him to put his money to use. Maybe he just thought his Master would never return from his long journey. But maybe he was just lazy, just living for himself. Matthew, in his version of this story, suggests that was the case (Matt 25:26). And so this is the verdict:

24"Then he said to those standing by, 'Take his mina away from him and give it to the one who has ten minas.' 25" 'Sir,' they said, 'he already has ten!' 26" He replied, 'I tell you that to everyone who has, more will be given, but as for the one who has nothing, even what he has will be taken away.'

The verdict seems so unfair. But Jesus is simply illustrating the principle that you cannot find eternal life by hanging onto what you've got. The only people who ever get to discover the real, satisfying, purposeful life that God intends for us are those who are willing to let go, take a risk, and give their lives away. I read this week an amazing story about an 83 year old "shut in" who was in failing health and couldn't leave her house. In spite of her limitations, she did what she could. She contacted Amnesty International asking if she could assist them in some way. They informed her she now had the responsibility for obtaining the release of a political prisoner in Indonesia. With pen in hand she proceeded to write countless letters to prison and governmental officials. After many months she received a letter from the prisoner:

They kept seeing and hearing my name. I was lost. I was nothing to them. They had locked me away for years with no cause. But you wouldn't let them forget. Thank God for you my woman. You kept my name alive. When they finally released me, they said my file was two inches thick with correspondence. Most of it was from you. They said the file was too much trouble for just one prisoner. I owe you my life. Words can never express my thanks. May every political prisoner's file become two inches thick.

It will soon be Monday again. We could wake up depressed and miserable as people without purpose or direction, or motivated and ambitious as people who know we're going somewhere. The choice is ours.

## Questions

1. Do you ever suffer from Monday morning syndrome? Why?
2. In his *The Divine Comedy*, Dante makes the inscription above the gate of hell read, "All hope abandon, you who enter here!" There is nothing quite as appalling and dreadful to the human spirit as to be irredeemably hopeless. According to this parable, what is the antidote to hopelessness?
3. Which character in this parable represents you: rebellious subject, good servant, or wicked servant?
4. Given the analogy between Jesus and the nobleman in this story, how do you understand his harsh judgment of the rebellious subjects in v 27? What are the implications for us?
5. What is the final destiny of the wicked servant? See Matthew 25:30. How would you respond to someone who said that this parable teaching that good works are necessary to salvation?
6. How do you understand the reward pictured in verses 17 and 19? "Some people have vague ideas of heaven as a kind of eternal retirement home. They're wrong. Heaven will be that place where we fully experience the fullness of the adventure, creativity and fruitfulness for which we were made." Discuss.
7. The message of this parable is that we are all entrusted with abilities and resources to invest for our Master. What are the gifts or opportunities that God has given you?
8. What is the single greatest obstacle to you one day hearing Jesus say, "Well done, good servant"?
9. Take some time to imagine the scene where you and God will one day review your life together. What is the single step you could take this week to minimise the regret factor at the end of your life?

## Acknowledgement

This message is largely drawn from a brilliant little book on the parables in Luke by Roy Clements: *A Sting in the Tale* (Leicester: IVP, 1995).