

33rd Sunday OT - (Year A) – November 19, 2017

PRV 31:10-13, 19-20, 30-31; PS 128:1-2, 3, 4-5; 1 THES 5:1-6; MT 25:14-30

My brother **Ed** went into an auto parts store some time ago. The young kid helping him was so **professional** and so **helpful** that my brother asked for the manager so he could commend this **outstanding** employee to his boss. To Ed's surprise the manager said:

“So many of our customers say the same thing about him. But the sad thing is, I'm going to have to *fire* him, because he *never* shows up *on time*. I never know what time he's going to roll in *after* his scheduled start time. No matter how many times I've talked to him about it, he just doesn't understand that *showing up late* creates problems for his co-workers and our customers. It's really a shame because it's so hard to find employees these days who have any sense of professionalism and responsibility.”

When you talk to small business owners these days—particularly those whose business provides customer service directly to the general public—they often complain how difficult it is to find even *marginal* employees. The **entitlement mentality**—*the false belief that “the world owes me something”*—is so pervasive in our society, that instead of excellence being the **norm** for a service businesses...*these days*, excellent service is more of a *surprise*...because mediocrity has become the **rule** rather than the **exception**.

And we would be naïve to believe that this kind of *entitlement mentality* does **not** infect our **relationship with God** and creep into the **Church**.

Just consider these statistics for **Catholics parishes across America**:

- **6.4 percent of registered parishioners contribute 80 percent of the volunteer hours in a parish**
- **6.8 percent of registered parishioners donate 80 percent of financial contributions**

This means that [r]oughly **7 percent of Catholic parishioners are doing almost everything in their faith community and paying almost entirely for the maintenance and mission of the parish.**

<https://dynamiccatholic.com/learning/four-signs-research>

What does this say about the **93% of parishioners** in the average Catholic parish who give **little** or **nothing** of *themselves* or their *money* to support their parish's **mission**?

Our **Gospel** reading for **today's** Mass comes from the **Gospel of Matthew**. But before breaking open **today's** parable, let's first jump to the Gospel reading from **last Tuesday's** Mass from the **Gospel of Luke**, where **Jesus** said:

“Who among you would say to your servant who has just come in from plowing or tending sheep in the field, ‘Come here immediately and take your place at table’? Would he not rather say to him, ‘Prepare something for me to eat. Put on your apron and wait on me while I eat and drink. You may eat and drink when I am finished’? Is he grateful to that servant because he did what was commanded? So should it be with you. When you have done all you have been commanded, say, ‘We are unprofitable servants; we have done what we were obliged to do.’” (Lk 17:7-10)

Jesus referred to disciples who do nothing more than their duty as “**unprofitable servants**” to distinguish them from those who are *productive and fruitful*—returning more to their “master” than the minimum. We'll see shortly, as we delve into the parable from *today's* Gospel what a “**profitable**” servant looks like, and what that means to the “**master**”—*God himself*.

First, let's apply this idea of “**unprofitable**” vs. “**profitable**” servant to a *Catholic parish*. But instead of referring to them as “**unprofitable**” or “**profitable**”, let's make a distinction between a “**minimalist**” Catholic and a “**fruitful**” Catholic.

A minimalist Catholic would be someone who meets the basic qualifications of what it means to be Catholic...but nothing more. They do the least possible to still “qualify” as a Catholic.

What, then, is the **least** one must do to be considered a “**minimalist**” Catholic?

How do we measure it?

I suggest we look at **two things**.

First: Does the person have their **Sacraments of Initiation**—Baptism, Confirmation and First Communion?

Secondly: Are they living by the *minimum standards* for Catholicism as enumerated in the **Five Precepts of the Church**?

As for the **Sacraments of Initiation**, that's pretty straightforward. We've either received them or we haven't.

But I would venture to guess that most people in the pews don't know the **Precepts of the Church**. Here they are:

1. **You shall attend Mass on Sundays and on holy days of obligation.**
2. **You shall confess your sins at least once a year.**
3. **You shall receive the sacrament of the Eucharist at least once during the Easter season.**
4. **You shall observe the days of fasting and abstinence established by the Church.**
5. **You shall help to provide for the needs of the Church.**

The explanatory note in the **Catechism of the Catholic Church** on the *5th Precept* states:

The faithful also have the duty of providing for the material needs of the Church, each according to his own abilities. (CCC, 2043)

Remember that phrase, "*each according to his own abilities*" because we're going to hear it again in **today's Gospel**. But before we move in that direction, ask yourself:

Do I even meet the **minimum standards** for a Catholic?

Do I go to Mass *every Sunday*?

Do I skip **Holy Days of Obligation**?

Do I go to **Confession** regularly?

Do I take seriously the command to **fast** on **Ash Wednesday** and **Good Friday**, and **abstain** from eating **meat** on *all the Fridays of the year*, not just during **Lent**?

Do I support the Church **financially** to the *maximum* I am able, or do I toss a **\$1 bill**, or a handful of **loose change** into the collection basket and **call it good**?

Here is where it might be getting a little *scary* for some of us, because we may—to this point—have always considered ourselves “**good Catholics**”, but when we look at the *bare minimum standards* to just be an *acceptable* Catholic, do we even qualify according to the **lowest criteria**?

Think more closely about this:

Just *meeting* the basics makes us “*unprofitable*” because just meeting the basics means doing “*what we are obliged to do*”.

That’s Jesus’ definition...not mine!

So...if we’re **not even meeting the minimum** then we’re not only **unprofitable**...

We’re a *liability* to God and to our fellow parishioners!

With that understanding, then, let’s dive into today’s Gospel.

Jesus told his disciples this parable: “A man going on a journey called in his servants and entrusted his possessions to them. To one he gave five talents; to another, two; to a third, one—to each according to his ability.” (Mt 25:14-15)

That last phrase should have caught our ear: “*to each according to his ability*”. Remember, that the explanation of the **5th Precept of the Church** uses that same phrase regarding **financial support** of our parish. So, we can see, right there, that this parable speaks to each of us...**directly...today**.

The parable continues...

Immediately the one who received five talents went and traded with them, and made another five. Likewise, the one who received two made another two. But the man who received one went off and dug a hole in the ground and buried his master’s money. (Mt 25:15-18)

As we know, even though the servant who doubled the **five talents** was *objectively more profitable* to the master than the servant who had doubled the **two talents**, it’s important to note that **the master’s response was exactly the same to both**. He was less concerned about the **amounts** because he knew that one servant had started out with **2 ½ times the resources** of the other. But **both doubled the investment**. What

delighted the master—what led him to invite **both** productive servants to share in his joy—was their **faithfulness and gratitude**...not the *amount* of their productivity.

The lazy servant, on the other hand, was blasted by the master, because unlike the other two who had actively **invested** their talent to **maximize the return** for their master, this guy **didn't even make the minimum effort** of putting the money in a *bank* where it would have earned at least a *tiny amount* for the master.

There are a couple of very important things we need to notice.

First, the servant who received **two** talents did **not** display the *childish entitlement mentality* so common today. He didn't **protest** that the servant with **five** had an unfair advantage over him and demand that the master “**level the playing field**”. *He took what the master had given him and made the best of it.* And **his reward was exactly the same as the servant with five!** Both received the same **esteem** from the master, not because of **what** they produced...but *because* they produced.

As for the **useless, wicked** servant, the Gospel tells us that he was *afraid*. But when we look at his words, we see more than fear. He was also **bitter, resentful and disrespectful** toward the master. He's the *poster boy for today's entitlement mentality*.

Then the one who had received the one talent came forward and said, 'Master, I knew you were a demanding person, harvesting where you did not plant and gathering where you did not scatter; so out of fear I went off and buried your talent in the ground. Here it is back.' (Mt 25:24-25)

He **buried** his talent.

What kind of things do we bury? **Dead** things.

This servant's relationship with the master was based on **self-pity, fear** and **resentment**. He was so self-centered that he could not see the master's generosity for having given him the talent in the first place. This is the person who does nothing with his or her Catholic faith—*just showing up*—but not even meeting the **minimum standard** for a **useless servant**. Calling oneself Catholic but doing nothing extra for the master...or anyone else.

Here's what the Bible says about the mentality of a person who wears the Catholic **label** but who withholds his or her **talents** and **resources** from their parish family...

...faith apart from works is dead. (Jas 2: 26)

Yesterday, more than **80 volunteers** from this parish—individuals from across various **ethnic** groups, **socioeconomic** levels and **ages**—came together in a work party to clean up and beautify the church grounds. It was so much fun and deeply rewarding to witness how...**many hands, working together**...can quickly transform **mediocrity** into **beauty**. Some of us were shoveling and hauling crushed granite, others were painting, still others were doing yard work.

Still, this morning, after the 7AM Mass, parishioners who took part in yesterday's work party are almost giddy with joy and excitement about how fun it was.

There were **two specific incidents** yesterday that brought joy to **us**, and to **God**.

First, one parishioner said to me, "**I met a whole bunch of people from the parish that I had never met before. It was awesome.**"

Then, a lady from the neighborhood, who may not even be Catholic, was walking by on the sidewalk and said, "**Thank you for doing this, it's really beautiful.**"

It didn't matter if a person was **pulling weeds** or **painting a curb**. Everyone contributed to make our Cathedral a place of beauty in an otherwise rough neighborhood...a **diamond in the rough** in a **deteriorating district**...a sign of hope for that passerby on the sidewalk.

Just think about this.

If that woman walking by was far from God, and not only noticed the **Cathedral grounds**, but now thinks of the **God who dwells here**, and eventually finds her way to the embrace of Jesus, then when God settles accounts with each of the volunteers, **each of us will have a saved soul in the credit column**, even if our actual investment yesterday was nothing more than **pulling weeds** or **pushing a broom**.

My brothers and sisters, this is what the Church means by **stewardship**. When we invest **ourselves** and our **resources** to provide **a profit to the Lord**, and a service to each other, then **we too** will deserve to hear these words:

'Well done, my good and faithful servant...Come, share your master's joy.' (Mt 25:21, 23)