

## The Parable of the Talents

Let's turn together to Matt. 25. Last week we started a study of the parables of Jesus. A parable is a simple story that illustrates a profound truth and Jesus taught using parables so frequently that his disciples asked why he spoke to the people in parables so much. Jesus answered, *"The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them. Whoever has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him. This is why I speak to them in parables: 'Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand.'"* Matt. 13:10-13

The paradox of Jesus' parables is that they both reveal and conceal. They reveal the secrets of the kingdom of heaven to those whose hearts are open and conceal the secrets of the kingdom of heaven from those whose hearts are closed. Let's pause to ask the Lord to grant us eyes to see, ears to hear, and hearts to receive His truth. **Pray.**

### **Matt. 25:14-30**

Jesus says, *For it will be like...* what's the "it" refer to? What will be like? We know he's talking about the kingdom of heaven because in the parable immediately preceding Jesus says, *Then the kingdom of heaven will be like...* and he tells the parable of the *ten virgins*. This parable will reveal another aspect of what the kingdom of heaven is like.

The kingdom of heaven will be like a man going on a journey who calls his servants and gives each of them talents. We think of talents as abilities and gifts like singing or dancing or carpentry but in Jesus' day a talent was a unit of money. A lot of money. A talent was estimated to be worth about \$600,000. So this man gave one servant 3 million dollars, the next \$1,200,000 and the last servant \$600,000. Some got more, some less, but all of them received a significant amount.

Then the man went away. That's where we are now in this story. Jesus, having accomplished our salvation on the cross and rising from the dead, went away. He ascended to heaven and has remained there a long time, but he is coming back. That's a message Matt. 24 and 25 repeat over and over again: Jesus is coming back. Until then, *the kingdom of heaven will be like* his servants being good stewards by investing the talents he has given us in kingdom work until he returns.

I think that the talents in this parable represent all that God gives us to steward during our lifetime: our skills, our time, our resources, our money, our energy, our affections, our prayers, our words, our work, everything. Talents represent our lives and what we do with them to be productive for the kingdom.

Originally I hadn't planned to preach on this parable, I had another parable picked out, but as I thought about the new year and all the opportunities and potential it holds, I thought of this parable and what a timely encouragement it would be for us to invest our talents – meaning all we are and all we have – in the service of Jesus and his kingdom in 2020. I wanted this message to be encouraging, uplifting, a biblical pep talk if you will. A happy appeal to all of us to invest ourselves in kingdom work.

But then we get to the end of this parable and the last words are, *Cast the worthless servant into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.* Not the most encouraging words in the Bible. This is not a story that ends with "and they lived happily ever after".

If the point of this parable is "invest your talents in the work of the kingdom...because if you don't you'll end up stripped of what little you have and cast into outer darkness" it's hard to preach that in an

encouraging, uplifting way: *get off your duff and do more for God this year or you'll end up in hell.*  
*Thanks for coming - have a good week.*

I suspect many of us already struggle with a nagging sense of failure when it comes to our service for the kingdom. We look at our lives and really don't see much return on the Lord's investment. We know we could/should be more wholehearted, more dedicated, more sacrificial in our service. And does what little I do make any difference? At a men's meeting in the fall, as we sat around a bonfire, one of the guys said they don't see where their lives are making a difference for God at all. He was being honest about the discouragement he felt in that area.

I am friends with a guy named John on FB. I know John from back when we lived on LI. He was a strong, super-zealous Christian, married with two young children, then he got hit with depression. Bad. It paralyzed him. And his wife and kids suffered as they watched their husband and dad struggle to find any motivation to care for his family or serve the Lord the way he once had.

One Sunday he visited the church I was attending, and I felt like I had a message he needed to hear. I remember before the service kneeling down next to where he was seated and basically telling him he needed to pull it together, that his depression was hurting his wife and kids. Maybe I could motivate him out of his depression if I piled enough guilt and failure on him. It was years before I realized what a jerk I was.

For those of us who struggle thinking we're not investing enough already, does this parable kneel next to us and say, "invest more talents than you already are in the kingdom or you'll be cast into hell." Maybe we'll feel motivated if we add to our discouragement a healthy dose of fear and condemnation.

I believe this parable kneels next to us with a very different message. Yes, it does contain a warning, but that warning isn't "do enough, invest enough, or be cast away." Rightly understood I believe this parable is a happy appeal to invest what God has given us in His kingdom work and stirs a deep encouragement and a sweet anticipation in our souls of that day when we stand before Jesus and give an account.

This parable combines a strong warning and a deep encouragement.

### **1. This parable warns and encourages us to know who Jesus really is**

This parable is centered on Jesus: *[The kingdom of heaven] will be like a man going on a journey.* That's Jesus. Jesus is the man. But what does this parable reveal to us about Jesus' character?

The third servant tells us Jesus is a harsh and hard man, profiting where he didn't labor and taking what doesn't belong to him. He makes Jesus sound like a mafia don. Fearful that he may lose what Jesus gave him, he buries the talent and returns it exactly as Jesus gave it to him. Jesus condemns the servant as wicked and lazy, takes the talent away from him, and casts him into outer darkness. If we accept this servant's assessment of Jesus' character, it's anything but encouraging.

The warning and the encouragement is this: don't see Jesus the way this servant saw Jesus. He isn't right about Jesus and he's not a servant of Jesus. This is not the story of a Christian who came up short on Judgment Day, who didn't have enough return on Jesus' investment to make it into heaven. He's not a Christian at all, he's a pretender. We know that for three reasons:

- a. The talents represent all that God has given him, all that he is – his abilities, his resources, his time, his money, his energy, his affections, everything. And over his lifetime this servant invests none of it into the kingdom. It's not that he only invests a little of it in the kingdom, it's that he

invests none of it in the kingdom. He buries the talent and doesn't give kingdom work a second thought until the Master returns. He has no kingdom interest at all.

- b. Secondly, he doesn't know who Jesus is and slanders his character horribly. He calls Jesus a hard man who steals what isn't his to enrich himself. He blames Jesus for his slothfulness – I didn't invest it out of fear of you. It's your fault!
- c. Third, and most importantly, this man is cast into what is a parable's equivalent of hell (outer darkness) because he had nothing to offer Jesus. But we know that no one enters heaven based on what we give to Jesus but what Jesus gave to us.

Here's where the encouragement comes in: Jesus is awesomely, amazingly giving and generous and gracious. He gave his life for us. He forgives us and receives us into his kingdom, not as servants but as friends. He gives us a place in his family not as slaves but as sons and daughters. And then he gives us talents. Some more, some less, but all valuable, all precious. And then he rejoices with us and rewards us for the returns we offer him on the talents he gave us in the first place. If you want to know who Jesus is, and what his character is like, I'm warning you: don't listen to the third servant. He was a pretender and a slanderer. Jesus is awesomely, amazingly generous and gracious. That's who Jesus is!

## **2. This parable warns and encourages us to know who we really are and what life really is**

This short parable in just a few paragraphs contains an overview of our lives – what we were created to be and do, what we should invest our lives in, what life is really about.

Many of you know that a dear sister in the church, Becky Finch, has been with her father for his last days on earth. Bill Merriweather went home to be with the Lord yesterday. He was a good and gentle and godly man, and I'm sure Jesus was waiting to welcome him home as he broke the tape and completed his race.

But thinking about Bill got me thinking about how we measure life, the meaning of life, the purpose of life, and the definition of a successful life. And I can't help but think that one of the "secrets of the kingdom" this parable reveals has to do with that big question: what is the ultimate purpose/meaning/measure of a life? It is wrapped up in our kingdom service. At the end of our lives, when we stand before Jesus to give account, he won't ask us how much money we made, or how comfortable we were, or how high up the social ladder we climbed. He will ask us what we did with the talents he entrusted to us. As we survey our priorities and plans for 2020, it's good and wise for us to make investing in service for the kingdom a priority. This parable provides some helpful insights about that.

### *a. God created us with a deep desire to be productive*

Jesus is measuring their productivity (what did you do with what you were given) and two of them had spent their time and energy being productive. The third spent no time or energy being productive.

We probably all know we're *supposed* to be productive, but there are a lot of things we're supposed to do that we don't want to do. Like eat our spinach. Or floss our teeth. Or get a colonoscopy at 50. We're supposed to, we don't necessarily want to! But I contend that we are not only supposed to, but we want to be productive. God created us with a deep desire to live productive lives. Like, a major part of a successful, meaningful, happy life is being productive. Why do I say that?

Look at Jesus' reward: you have been faithful over a little, I will set you over much. His reward for productive work isn't an eternal vacation, it's more work! You were productive with a little, I'm going to entrust you with more so you can be even more productive. Being productive is what we want to do

because God created us to want to be productive.

Sometimes when we're feeling empty and listless inside, if we're super busy the answer might be to slow down and get refreshed. But if we're doing very little and we're feeling those things, what we probably need to do is get busy in service for the kingdom. There is a weariness that comes from not being busy and a joy that comes from serving the Lord! It's what we were created for!

*b. We are not equally "talented" but if we're faithful with what we've been given we can equally please the Lord*

Verse 15 tells us the man gave to his servants varying amounts of talents *according to their ability*. The amount of responsibility they were given was in accordance to their abilities. The playing field isn't even. It's not. The Lord gives five talents to some, two to others, one to others. We shouldn't compare or be jealous. Life isn't measured by how we compare to others. It's not a competition.

Jesus didn't give them an equal amount of talents but he gave them an equal amount of praise and reward. He was as pleased with the guy who doubled two talents as he was with the guy who doubled five talents. And when he asks the third servant why he didn't take the small step of investing the talent in the bank so at least there'd be interest, I think we can imagine he would have praised and rewarded that small step of faithfulness in the same way.

I think the Lord sees obscurity differently than we do. I used to think it was the big name Christians who were really crushing it – and if they're faithful to sincerely love and serve Jesus they are. But I have a new appreciation for those who serve and love and give and invest in obscurity all their lives. Those who invest and give in such small, unimpressive (to us) ways that they may even wonder at times if their lives are making any difference at all. They may even confess at a men's bonfire that they don't think their lives are having any kingdom impact at all. But they are. More than they know. And Jesus is pleased more than they know.

I think we may be surprised on that day as Jesus honors those who served in small, obscure ways, never really thinking it added up to much. Be encouraged – yeah, let's recommit to investing. Let's pray and work to make 2020 a productive year for the kingdom. Let's have faith that God can use us, me, you, to make a difference for the kingdom. But be encouraged – a lot of that will be small things that don't look like much to us.

I suspect that on that day, the raw truth will be we all did so little with what he gave us, that we will expect him to say, "that's it? That's all?" and we will be surprised to hear him say "well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into my joy." Then we'll talk to others who had the same experience: "did he say well done, good and faithful servant to you?" Yeah, you? Yeah. And we'll realize it's more about him, his grace, love, kindness, encouragement, his fierce advocacy over us, than it is about us. That's who Jesus is.

*c. Let's remember to invest in people, for the kingdom is made up of people*

What does investing in the kingdom even mean? It's investing the gospel of Jesus in the lives of people. Jesus came to seek and save the lost...people. The only thing that can transition from this tired old world into the kingdom of heaven is people.

God has given you certain unique talents (personality, gifts, resources, spheres of influence). Use them to spread the love of Jesus. Use them to witness of Jesus' generous, gracious character. Use them to be his hands and feet to go to the hurting, the broken, the outcast. Invest them to help people come to know

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Jesus. God has given you the ability to pray (and He hears you). Pray for people to know Jesus. People entering the kingdom of heaven is what the kingdom of heaven is all about. It's why Jesus came, and why he sends us. Let's recommit ourselves in 2020 to invest in people for the gospel's sake with new vision and passion.