

Series Kingdom Parables

This Message Handling the Lord's Talents

Scripture Matthew 25: 14-30

Matthew chapters 24 and 25 provide the followers of Jesus with a very helpful sequence of instruction about how to live in this present age. One of the key words was "watchfulness." Jesus said that, just as the fig tree was an indication that summer was approaching, discerning disciples would be able to understand when the end of the age was approaching. Jesus said that His disciples were not to live like the people in the time of Noah. Those people were so preoccupied with their day-by-day activities that they took no notice of the indications of the approaching judgment until it was, for them, too late to be saved.

The parables taught by Jesus linked "watchfulness" with "faithfulness." In the parable which contrasted the faithful and wise servant with the foolish, wicked servant, Jesus made it known that the uncertain length of His absence would not be an excuse for His followers to be careless about fulfilling their responsibilities. As Jesus explained, the ideal servant would faithfully carry out his assigned responsibilities whether the master was present or not.

Another theme in the parables was "preparedness." You will recall that five bridesmaids failed to make adequate preparations for the delay in the arrival of the bridegroom, and, as a result, they were excluded from the wedding celebrations.

"Watchfulness," "faithfulness," and "preparedness." These were among the essential spiritual traits that Jesus wanted His disciples to manifest through their lifestyles during this present age. They are the behaviors that He wants from us.

The parable we will think about today adds one more important characteristic. It concerns our "performance," our effectiveness, as the followers of Jesus. Jesus expects all of His disciples to be faithful, diligent, and productive in the administration of the resources He entrusts to us. The Scripture passage describes the actions of three servants, two of whom are pleasing to their master and one who didn't have the correct attitude and behavior.

Read Matthew 25:14-30

By means of this parable, Jesus taught His disciples more about His expectations of them during this present age. The followers of Jesus are to be busy and productive for Him. We are responsible for how we use the resources He provides.

This parable, like the previous ones we have thought about, anticipates the future return of Jesus after a long indeterminate period of time. Jesus made it clear that the specific time of His return to earth cannot be known by any human. He said that the date was known only to the Father in heaven. However, in view of the certainty of His return, Jesus wanted all His followers to know that they were expected to be busy doing kingdom activities and to adhere to certain standards of conduct.

The key component in this parable concerns the use of resources which are provided by Jesus to all His followers. Jesus referred to these resources as “talents.” In our western understanding of a “talent,” we think of some sort of natural ability, such as an artistic talent, or talent for organization, or for making friends. However, the “talents” in the parable represented money, and quite a lot of money.

Two thousand years ago a “talent” could be of gold, silver, or copper. Think of a bar or brick which weighed approximately 70 pounds. The value of that talent depended on the material. A talent of gold would naturally be of much greater value than a talent of copper. Seventy pounds of gold would have a lot of value!

The talent also came to represent a standardized value of coinage. By this reckoning, a talent represented 6000 denarii. One denarii was the typical wage earned by a common laborer in one day. A talent was, therefore, the equivalent of wages earned in 6000 days of work. That’s 20 plus years of employment! By whatever definition we use, a talent represented a sizable sum of money.

The point here is that the master in the parable gave over an exceptional amount of resources to three of his servants, putting his valuable financial assets in the hands of others. He was allowing his reputation and future security to be determined by the honesty, trustworthiness, and business acumen of the servants. If they would misuse his money, or make poor investments, the master would suffer the loss.

The teaching of this parable is obviously applicable to the subject of spiritual gifts and to the incredible resources which is made available to believers by the Holy Spirit. These are subjects which were later explained in the letters of the Apostle Paul. He taught that each believer has been given at least one spiritual gift, that these spiritual gifts are of great value in God's economy, and that such gifts are to be used for the common good of the Church, the Body of believers. Both Jesus and Paul understood that believers have the ability to advance the reputation of Jesus and expand the kingdom of God on earth by how they utilize and manage the spiritual resources which have been given to them.

Jesus had specific expectations of His servant followers, and He communicated these expectations to His disciples on several occasions. After His resurrection and before His ascension into heaven, He said, "I am sending you out into the world as I have been sent into the world" (*John 20:21*). That meant that they were to teach about and demonstrate the reality of the kingdom in order to fulfill the purposes of both Father and Son. On another occasion Jesus said, "You are to make disciples of all nations, ... teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you" (*Matthew 28:19-20*). Just before His ascension, He said, "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (*Acts 1:8*).

Jesus said that His disciples would be able to carry out these actions because the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit would provide to them the necessary resources. The authority and power and the guidance of God would be available to them. Jesus said, "I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing." Jesus even said, "the Holy Spirit will make it possible for you to do even greater things than what I have done." (*John 14:11-12*).

In the parable, the talents were distributed according to the master's evaluation of the servant's capacities. This is in keeping with the New Testament teaching about how the Holy Spirit sovereignly distributes spiritual gifts according to God's eternal purposes.

The Apostle Paul wanted each believer to know that he/she has been placed in the Body for a specific purpose. "Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. We have different gifts, according to the grace given us" (*Romans 12:4-6*). Paul concluded his teaching with this instruction: "let each person use his gift in accordance with the measure of faith God has given" (*Roman 12:3*).

It might seem that the master in the parable misjudged the character of the third servant. However we need to keep in mind two principles. First, each person has free will to either obey God or to ignore the prompting of the indwelling Holy Spirit. We will discover in a few minutes that the attitudes and motivations of the third servant were not oriented to the master, but were rather on himself.

The second principle is stated this way: “to whom much is given, from him shall much be required” (*Luke 12:48*). The third servant was given a unique opportunity to perform a significant service for the master, and he was given an abundance of resources to accomplish his service, but, as we will later recognize, his laziness and fearfulness kept him from taking any action at all.

Two of the servants promptly put their master’s resources to work. The text states that they did so “at once.” They obeyed the master without hesitation. And they proved to be good stewards of the master’s resources. Their efforts were transformed into significant returns on their master’s investments. No wonder the master was pleased with them on the day of accountability.

The day of accountability came “after a long time,” but the delay in the return of the master did not affect the efforts of the good servants. They did not get weary in their “well-doing.” Servant number one doubled the master’s resources. As the result, this servant was praised. He was deemed “good and faithful.” His reward was twofold: he was given increased responsibility and he was able to share in the master’s happiness.

Perhaps the idea of “increased responsibilities” doesn’t strike us as a reward for good service — we might prefer to be rewarded with a Hawaiian cruise or some “time off,” but in the kingdom of God, “increased responsibilities” represents great privileges. Faithfulness “in a few things,” that is, obedient actions taken in regard to spiritual service assignments, brings about a deeper experience with God — bringing about what we might describe as “spiritual growth.” Through obedience, the believer learns that each step of faithful service leads to a greater degree of confidence, more blessing, a heightened sense of significance and purpose, and being “on target,” spiritually speaking.

The phrase “share your master’s happiness” has been explained in various ways by commentators. Some think it refers to the special joy that comes from doing the will of God. For example, Jesus endured His suffering on the cross because of the joy it would bring to the heavenly Father. In the same way, believers can experience joy in service even when the service involves pain and suffering. Perhaps you remember the experience of the apostles in Acts chapter 5. The religious leaders ordered that they be flogged. Afterward, the apostles rejoiced “because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name of Jesus” (*Acts 5:40-41*). Perhaps that is the meaning of the phrase “share your master’s happiness.”

Other commentators point out that the phrase is the equivalent of “enter the kingdom.” Some commentators think it points to a time of feasting, and has the meaning “come join the master at his table of celebration.” This interpretation also fits with Scripture, which states that believers are invited by Jesus, after His return, to join Him at His special wedding celebration supper. Regardless of which interpretation is best, I think we can all agree that compliments and rewards from Jesus at the end of the age will be a good thing for believers.

The second servant also doubled the master’s resources and received similar praise and rewards. The important lesson we learn from the second servant is that faithfulness is not determined by the number of talents a person is given, but by how the person uses the resources which are given to him.

Now we come to servant number three. The first impression we have is his attempt to justify his actions. This servant looked upon the master as a “hard” man, and as someone who “harvested where he did not sow and gathered where he had not scattered seed.” In other words, he saw the master as a person who benefited from the labors of others. That actually is not far from the truth. We recognize that the Church grows by the missionary witness of the servant followers of Jesus. In this sense, Jesus benefits and is honored by the work of His followers. Because He invests in them, they serve as His representatives.

The third servant also recognized the risk factors in trying to obey the master. He pictured himself in an unenviable position. If he tried to increase the value of the one talent entrusted to him, he assumed that he would not personally benefit from the profit — he would have to hand it over to the master; and if he failed and lost the value of the talent, he assumed that he would incur the displeasure of the master. According to the servant's logic, the safest and easiest course of action was to do nothing, not even hand the talent over to the bankers so it could draw interest.

Furthermore, the servant deliberately ignored his responsibility to his master and did not feel any obligation to do what he was expected to do. He was a servant who disregarded the instructions of his master. This unwillingness to do what was expected of him indicated his lack of respect and loyalty for the master. Fear and laziness overshadowed any feelings of love, trust, and obligation he should have had. He thought only of himself and how service on behalf of the master would impact his own well-being, and thus he presented himself as a disobedient servant.

The master condemned the servant on the basis of the servant's own words. In verse 26, the master said, in essence, "Your conviction that I was a hard man should have strongly motivated you to obey my instructions and to do what I wanted you to do. Fear of punishment should have overcome your fear of failure. You should have exerted yourself all the more to please me."

From the parable we can recognize that the master was harsh only to the man who was deliberately rebellious and lazy. To those servants who were obedient and faithful, the master was generous with his gifts and rewards. Because the wicked servant had proven to be "worthless" to the master, there was no basis for an on-going relationship between them. The servant was banished from the master's presence; in fact was cast into the darkness to the place which is synonymous with hell.

The talent was taken from the wicked servant and given to the one who had the ten talents. The explanation for this action is in verse 29 and is stated in both positive and negative ways: "everyone who has will be given more, and he will have an abundance, but whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him."

This same principle had been stated by Jesus about two years previously, on the occasion when He taught the very first parable (*see Matthew 13:12*). At that time, Jesus used the statement to describe how people respond to the truth He was presenting. He said that listeners who failed to respond to the little glimmers of basic truth He was giving to them would be unable and unqualified to receive more truth. The application in Matthew 25 has to do with service. The servant of Jesus who is unfaithful in small things, or few things, is unqualified and becomes ineligible to handle greater, more important, kingdom responsibilities.

Verse 29 is a serious warning. Through their unfaithfulness, some people who think they are servants of Jesus can disqualify and remove themselves from the beneficial influences and truths that Jesus provides, but servants who please Him will receive abundant blessings.

Let me summarize some of the most important lessons which apply to us:

1. God grants to His people the opportunities, abilities, and resources He wants them to use for His benefit — for His glory and the expansion of His kingdom.
2. Believers are given different opportunities and abilities that the Holy Spirit endeavors to coordinate for the overall well-being of the Church.
3. The number of opportunities and abilities given to individual believers is not as important as how the opportunities and abilities are used. On the day of judgment, the question each believer must answer is “Have I been faithful in using what God has given to me?” Failure to appropriately use what God has entrusted to us is a grievous sin.
4. Every activity of the believer needs to be done with a view to the day of reckoning that is coming. The service performed by believers in this age is incredibly important since it has an eternal impact on their own lives and the lives of others.
5. The goal of the believer is Jesus’ statement, “Well done, good and faithful servant.”

The overall point of the parable is plain: Every believer must be faithful in using the opportunities for service which God has given. God given opportunities should, out of gratitude to God, be used diligently in such a manner that the kingdom will be advanced, people will be benefited, and God will be pleased.

Are you causing God to smile today?