

## Using Your Talents

Matthew 25:14-30

What are your talents? Maybe you discovered them through a personality test, which showed you think in a certain way that would work best in certain careers. Maybe you discovered them through trial and error, hopping through activities and majors until you found one you did well. Maybe you found them through a mentor, someone who came alongside you and helped you to see things inside you that you hadn't seen before.

Those aren't the talents we're talking about in today's parable, at least not directly. In Jesus' day, the Greek word *talanton* was a unit of measure which became a unit of money. Estimates vary as to exactly how much it was, but it was generally six thousand day's wages, so if you replace talent with "million dollars," you're in the right ballpark. And so if a master entrusts his servants with 8 talents total and then leaves for a long time, this is a master with great resources, as well as great trust in his servants.

The first two servants invest and use what they've been given, doubling the initial capital. The third servant just takes what he's been given and buries it in the ground, refusing to risk losing it. When the master returns, the first two servants are commended. The third one, though, is punished severely for not taking risks.

The reason that he gives for not taking any risks is the way that he sees his master. "Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you scattered no seed, so I was afraid..." Instead of seeing his master as someone who trusted him and was generous with him, he sees his master as a hard, harsh man, someone to fear.

After hearing this parable, how do you picture Jesus? Do you focus on the end, and see him as a harsh judge, condemning those who don't take risks to use what they've been given? Do you focus on the fact that the master went away for a long time, and see Jesus as someone who lived a long time ago but doesn't affect our daily lives? Or do you see him as a boundlessly generous friend who goes away and gives us far more than we want or need to imitate him in his absence?

When we imagine God primarily as an enforcer of rules, we can get hung up by the legalism of religion.

We can visualize God as stern and prone to punishment, and we come to believe that everything bad in our lives is punishment from God. We see God as arbitrary and capricious, and that's what we experience, a fickle and unsympathetic God who meets our expectations.

On the other hand, when we view God primarily in terms of grace and generosity, we are surprised and uplifted by the numerous gifts and moments of grace we experience all around us. And when we imagine God to be a God of love, we find it far easier to experience God's love in our own lives and to share it with others. It's easier to use our talents for God's glory when we're motivated out of love, not out of fear.

Fear can be one of the most powerful motivators. Marketers use it to sell everything from cars and life insurance to breakfast cereal and deodorants. Politicians use it as a way to fire up the base, either raising up fear of what will happen if their opponent gets elected or a fear of what's happening now and how their election will solve all of those problems.

The problem with fear as a motivator is it only works in the short term. Fear can cause the fight or flight instincts to set in. Or, as seems to happen with the third servant in today's parable, fear caused him to be paralyzed. Instead of using his talent in some way, any way, to earn interest or make a profit, he instead buried it out of fear.

Fear isn't usually the way God brings out the talents of the people he calls. Instead, he motivates out of love. When God calls Moses at the burning bush, Moses spends a while explaining why he isn't the one God should use. God instead promises Moses that He will give him the words he needs to say, send his brother with him as moral support, and Moses will accomplish the mission God has of saving his people. When Jesus called his disciples, he didn't use threats; instead, he saw their talents and skills and helped them to see how they could become fishers of men.

Martin Luther called this the idea of vocation, of calling. In his day, the only people who had callings were those who worked for the church. Priests, monks, and nuns were held in high esteem, while normal, everyday people were not. Luther wanted to remind

everyone that every job was important. Every job was a calling from God. Some of you may devote your life to caring for animals or tending the earth that it brings forth food for the table. This stewardship of creation is a gift from God. Not all people are called to such service but God in Christ has called you and equipped you for this work. There are different gifts, different callings, but the same God. All the different callings work together.

Vocation isn't just occupation, either. It includes all that you are, all that you do, all of your talents and skills and abilities. You may teach the faith to your children. Not in formal classes with desks and lectures and quizzes but informally, in the car as you drive your son to soccer practice and talk about challenges to his faith, or at the nursing home, as your children visit their grandfather and you offer to pray. Martin Luther even said that God smiles when a parent changes a baby's diaper, when it's done in faith. Parenting is a gift from God. Not all people are called to such service but God, in Christ, has called you and equipped you for this work.

What's more, the gifts that God gives us, the skills and talents we have as different members of the body of Christ, aren't just used inside the walls of the church. We get so focused on doing church that we can fail to be the church. We can get concerned about getting people to serve on church boards, getting people to do jobs and use their talents within the church that we forget about those who are being the body of Christ in their everyday lives. A few years ago I remember a pastor talking about how frustrated he got with a woman in his former congregation. He knew that she had gifts that would be of great use for the church. She was a teacher, yet he could never get her to help with the Sunday school program. Finally, one time that he asked, she said that her concern wasn't about the kids who were in church. Her priority was caring for the students that she taught in her classroom, showing them the love of Christ. She used her talents to build God's kingdom.

How do you see Jesus? Remember that Jesus tells this parable just days before he will give his life on the cross. Jesus has spent his life and ministry proclaiming God's kingdom, feeding the hungry, healing the sick, driving out demons, raising the dead, offering forgiveness, and welcoming all who recognize their

need into the loving embrace of God. And for that message he is crucified. That's how much God wants us to know of God's love. And just in case we miss or underestimate that message, God raises Jesus on the third day that we might know that life is stronger than death and love more powerful than hate or fear.

As we get ready to celebrate Thanksgiving, we look to God as the giver of all good things. We thank God for the gifts and abilities and talents and skills we've been given. We look for ways to use those talents to share God's love with those around us. We don't do those things out of fear, but out of thankfulness and gratitude to our gracious God who gives us far more than we deserve or need.

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