

Using Our Spiritual Gifts

MATTHEW 25:14-30

SEPTEMBER 28, 2014

Some of the most common questions which ministers receive from members of their congregations deal with the subject of stewardship. These questions can take on many different forms, but often come down to these: "If the Church is really concerned about my spiritual life, why is it necessary to speak about stewardship?" "Isn't it more important to talk about a right relationship with God and neighbor than to talk about such mundane things as church budgets and buildings?" "Why is the Church so concerned about my money, my time, my talents?" "What does stewardship have to do with Jesus' message of abundant life?"

These are valid questions and they deserve to be answered. Remember, Jesus had a lot to say about stewardship, even if he never used that word, when he spoke about using our spiritual gifts.

As we look at Christ's Parable of the Talents today, the message is clear: God gives different people different gifts. God made us all different with unique abilities. Our parable tells us that God gave three men different gifts. One received five talents, another two, and another one.

So what is a talent, anyway? A talent was an ancient unit of weight and value. In the New Testament, the term "talent" meant something different than it does today. The talents Jesus was talking about referred to the largest unit of currency at the time. According to *New Nave's Topical Bible*, someone who possessed five talents of gold or silver was a multimillionaire by today's standards. Some scholars calculate the talent in the parables to be the equivalent of 20 years of wages for a common worker. Other scholars estimate more conservatively, valuing the New Testament talent somewhere between \$1,000 to \$30,000 dollars today. So I'll leave it to you to decide whether to take this story literally or figuratively (or both).

It's not what a person's talent actually is, though, that matters; what matters is how they use it. God never demands abilities from a person that he or she doesn't have, but wants us to use our gifts and possessions to the fullest extent. So, people are not equal in gifts, but people can be equal in effort. I'll say that again. People may not be equal in gifts or possessions, but we all have the ability of equality in effort.

In 1 Peter 4:10, we read “Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God’s grace in its various forms.” Nobody is left out of this directive. “Each one,” the Bible says, not “whoever has a gift.” God is the giver of these gifts. Pride in our gifts has no place in our lives as Christians stewards because we have in no way earned them or acquired them on our own. That’s why the Bible refers to our abilities as “spiritual gifts.”

What we are responsible for is the careful use of the gift or gifts God gives us. In using our spiritual gifts, God calls us to the “faithful administration of God’s grace in its various forms.” Just as our money does not belong to us and is not to be used for our own purposes, neither are our gifts ours, nor are they to be used for self-glorification, but according to God’s plan and for his glory. When I chose music school over seminary when I was younger, it was about what I thought I would enjoy – what would make ME look good, and what would be easier for ME. Jesus’ parable tells us that whatever we have, be it little or much, we are called to **give it all we’ve got** in service to God.

Jesus knew -- and taught -- that people differ in talents and possessions. There is a diversity in God’s gifts, just as there is in the recipients of those gifts. Continuing in 1 Peter we read, “If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God. If anyone serves, he should do it with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ.” (1 Peter 4:11). We are to be using all our spiritual gifts to bring glory to God.

For example, one person may draw the plans for a great church building; another may compose music for its organ. One may carve and lay the stonework for its beautification, while another constructs the road leading to its door. Still another person may provide the funds necessary to build and maintain the building. In this example, every person has a talent – something to contribute; no one is without some gift essential to the building. We are not equal, but we are all called equally to share what have to share. Using our spiritual gifts results in service to others, building up the Church, and glorifying God.

But guess what? Our Scripture reading goes on to tell us that the reward for work well done is more work! The two servants who had done their work well don't get to sit back and take it easy because they've done well. No! They're given greater tasks and bigger responsibilities in the work of the master.

"That's not fair!" I hear you cry – and it's not, but it is a reality. We know from experience that the busiest people are usually those who are willing to do more. And you know, if you want a job well done, you ask a busy person to do it.

Maybe this has been your experience at work, or even in the life of this congregation. You've been commended for a job well done; then, in the same breath, you're asked to take on even more responsibilities. In our parable today, the master took away the one talent from the servant who had wasted it and gave it to the person who had started with five talents and doubled the investment. Those who prove responsible are given even greater responsibilities. Paul did the same thing with the church at Philippi (Philippians 4:14-19). He commended the people for giving funds for the support of the early growth of the Church. He praised them and said that they were truly partners in ministry with him. Then, after his sincere praise, he encouraged them to even greater efforts and greater giving. This may sound tough on those who have already given much until we remember that one thing this parable teaches us is that the person who doesn't try, in fact, is the one who ends up losing the most.

The man given one talent did not lose his talent; he simply did nothing with it. Even if he had taken a risk and lost, it would have been better than doing nothing at all. "But the man who had received the one talent went off, dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money" (Matthew 25:18). It is always a temptation for the "one-talent" person to say, "I have so little and I can do so little with what I have, it is not worth even trying. I have no contribution to make." The condemnation is not that a person has little to offer, but that he won't even try to use it, refusing to risk it for the common good.

It is hard to escape the idea that this parable was told mainly for the "one-talent" person. This individual stands center stage. You know there are more one-talent individuals in the world than five-talent individuals? Only a few are poets like Keats, inventors like Edison,

statesmen like Lincoln, philanthropists like Rockefeller, or theologians like Luther. The real reason for the failure of the “one-talent” person or for those of us who have little is not that we have less to begin with, but that we are afraid. As the guy in the parable said, “I was afraid.” He dared no venture. He lacked faith in life, in himself, and in God.

The one-talent person is content with the status quo. If he lived in Hitler’s Germany, he might have been one of those who were silent when they could have spoken. The one-talent person is one note on the piano, but any pianist will tell you, one missing note can wreak havoc on a keyboard. The person with small means and small gifts can do great things. Wasn’t it just a small boy with only two fish and a loaf of bread who gave all he had to Jesus so that 5,000 could eat?

Jesus laid down a universal rule of life: “For everyone who has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him” (Matthew 25:29). When we fail to use and share what we have, we lose it. It’s like a smile. If you want to keep it, you have to give it away! As Jesus said, “...those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel will save it.” (Mark 8:35). “The master called his servants and entrusted his property to them” (Matthew 25:14). God has called us and has entrusted all things to us in stewardship. God is the Owner and the Giver of all that we have and are.

When Jesus said, “Follow me,” he challenged us to a complete and full surrender without reservation – without our “fingers crossed.” Let’s give it all we’ve got in bringing to bear on our hearts and minds the meaning and the responsibility of stewardship. In the stuff of which we are made as *imago Dei* – the image of God -- there is something that responds to a challenge which demands courage and dedication. The call of Christ through this parable is such a challenge. The whole question of stewardship really comes down to asking, “How much am I taking out of life, and how much am I putting back into it? “What will the Master’s response to my stewardship be? Will I hear, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant’?”

It's OK to be afraid like the one-talent guy in the story. But let me close with a favorite poem that you may have heard before, "Our Greatest Fear," by Marianne Williamson:

*Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate.
Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure.
It is our light not our darkness that most frightens us.
We ask ourselves, who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous,
talented and fabulous?
Actually, who are you not to be?
You are a child of God.
Your playing small does not serve the world.
There's nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other
people won't feel insecure around you.
We were born to make manifest the glory of
God that is within us.
It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone.
And as we let our own light shine,
we unconsciously give other people
permission to do the same.
As we are liberated from our own fear,
Our presence automatically liberates others.*

So remember, your talent is God's gift to you. What you do with it is your gift back to God.

Amen.