Chapter 4

Using Your Talents

The Parable of the Talents
{Matthew 25:14-30}
Ed Gallagher

One Main Thing

Failing to use the resources God has given us results from fear and laziness and leads to condemnation.

Introduction

"Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow" (James 1:17).

Christians are a blessed people, and these blessings come from God. We acknowledge that God "has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ" (Eph 1:3). Those blessings surely include redemption from sin and hope for a glorious future. The apostles also talked about other sorts of spiritual gifts that their readers needed to use for the benefit of others

(cf. 1 Pet 4:10; Rom 12:3, 6; etc.). Paul explains extensively that the distribution of various spiritual gifts among the Corinthian believers was not designed to exalt individual Christians but to build up the body through love (1 Cor 12–14). Similarly, the apostle explains in Ephesians 4:11–16 that different believers have different functions and abilities so that the whole church may benefit.

Besides all these tremendous spiritual blessings, God also provides for our physical needs (cf. Matt 6:25–34). Indeed, American Christians in the twenty-first century can rightly claim that God has blessed us materially more than most people in world history could "ask or imagine" (cf. Eph 2:20). Perhaps followers of Christ have not reflected enough on what God intends for us to do with all this abundance of wealth. We may assume that He wants us to live comfortable lives, that the fact that we happened to be born in America as opposed to some other country with more primitive conditions was simply a lucky break on our part, or perhaps part of God's design to make life easy on us. Maybe we think of our wealth like the Corinthians thought about their spiritual powers: it's all for me.

The Parable of the Talents suggests a different interpretation.

Setting

Before His betrayal and crucifixion, Jesus spends time preparing His disciples for their life and ministry without His physical presence among them (Matt 24–25). He talks some about the destruction of Jerusalem that would occur in a few decades, and He talks about His own glorious return in judgment, His second coming. He repeatedly emphasizes that His disciples need to be ready for the coming judgment, because it will happen unexpectedly, like a thief in the night (24:42–44). They need to be faithful and responsible slaves who do their work diligently (24:45–51). They need to be like wise virgins who, with adequate oil for their lamps, are ready to meet the bridegroom (25:1–13). They need to be like the slaves who use their master's resources for his advantage rather than hide it in the ground (25:14–30).

The Parable of the Talents—in its literal meaning—has to do with money. A talent was a unit of weight, about 50–75 lbs. The value of a talent varied depending on what material it was—gold, silver, copper—but it was always an enormous sum of money. A talent of gold, for instance, would have been equivalent to about 6,000 denarii, which was the standard day's wage for a laborer

(cf. Matt 20:1–16).[1] In 2016, 50 lbs. of gold would cost around a million dollars, so we can imagine the slave receiving five talents to have about five million dollars at his disposal. A similar parable is found in Luke 19:11–27, the Parable of the Pounds, but this parable seems to have a different point, and the unit of currency is much smaller: a mina or "pound" is about 100 denarii.

Interpretation

This parable is about using the gifts that God has provided. We often (correctly) think about this parable as an admonition to use our abilities, and this interpretation is helped along by the fact that the English word "talent" happens to mean "ability." In fact, the English word "talent" with this meaning originated in interpretations of this parable. Literally, the Greek word "talent" referred to money, but the parable uses this word to symbolize whatever gifts the Christian might possess.

Jesus says that each of the slaves receives talents in accordance with their abilities (25:15), an idea that

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[1] W. D. Davies and D. C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew, 3 vols.*, International Critical Commentary (London: T&T Clark, 1988–97), 3.405.

corresponds to other biblical teaching regarding spiritual gifts (1 Pet 4:10; Rom 12:6). This notion is a unique aspect of this parable that does not appear in the surrounding parables and teachings.

The first two slaves used their talents and profited by them. Jesus does not directly make an application from this point, but we might imagine that He intended for His followers to understand that they should use their abilities and resources for the benefit of others. He teaches this lesson directly on many occasions.[2] These slaves are rewarded by a lofty commendation and admittance to their master's joy (25:21, 23).

The third slave hid his talent in the ground because he was afraid of the master (vv. 24–25). The master also accuses the slave of being lazy (25:26), though the slave may have described himself as cautious. His fear of making a mistake with his talent paralyzed him, but his inactivity—his laziness—infuriated the master and led to the worst kind of punishment (v. 30). It seems that the master would have been less angry if the slave had used the talent in some way, even if his business venture resulted in a less successful return than the

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[2] On money specifically, see Matt 6:3–4; 19:21; on wider use of resources, see 25:31–46.

other slaves, or possibly even a loss. "A previous parable implies that fearful inaction is unwarranted because God will forgive unwise action with his resources (18:23–25)."[3]

Application

This parable has significant application for the church today in two directions: faithfulness and diligence lead to great reward; fear and sloth lead to menacing punishment. These lessons are taught in any number of passages of Scripture. The distinctive element in this parable is the emphasis on the gifts given by God to each disciple in accordance with his or her ability, and the need for the disciple to put these gifts to use.

The Parable of the Talents implies that followers of Jesus—individually and collectively—need to identify the gifts given by their master and employ them. Many of us can identify wealth as one of the gifts given to us by God, and our master expects us to use this gift on behalf of others. Other gifts that we have might include various talents or opportunities; squandering them angers our master. Our children are gifts, and we must diligently and carefully mold

[3] David L. Turner, *Matthew,* Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008).

them without wasting our opportunities. The church is a gift, and we must wisely and fearlessly deploy our human resources to the glory of God.
The wicked slave in the parable misuses his talent because of fear and laziness. You don't have to think too hard about the church today to recognize some of the same problems. There are often situations in which church leaders fail to act in a positive and bold way out of fear. This parable encourages us to question the wisdom of such inactivity and whether laziness might also be a factor. Sometimes, because of fear, we seek merely to hold on to what we have (the status quo) rather than work toward advancement. The master in this parable sees such fear as a mark of wickedness.

The fourth-century preacher John Chrysostom commented, "Do you see how sins of omission are also met with extreme rejection? It is not only the covetous, the active doer of evil things and the adulterer, but also the one who fails to do good."[4] The words of James 4:17 echo in our minds.

Gregory the Great from the sixth century reflected on the notion of hiding a talent in the earth and suggested that it represents "employing one's

[4] Manlio Simonetti, ed. *Matthew 14–28,* Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, New Testament (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2002), 229.

abilities in earthly affairs, failing to seek spiritual profit, never raising one's heart from earthly thoughts."[5] We may be able to recognize these sorts of qualities in those churchgoers who remain on the sidelines of commitment and whose behavior appears unaffected by the gospel. They squander their talent.

Even the slave with the single talent was expected to put that talent to good use. Just because a disciple might not have the same abilities or resources as someone else does not permit him or her to waste the gifts God has provided. The second slave did not gain as much as the first, but he was not for that reason given any less reward. He used what he had, and received praise equal to that of the one who had used his greater resources to gain greater profit.

Conclusion

If we can identify resources that God has given us, we had better also be prepared to identify ways that we are using them for His kingdom. When our master returns, He will ask what we've been up to. We need a better answer than maintaining the status quo.

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[5] Simonetti, *Matthew*, 223.

Discussion

1. What resources has God put at your disposal? What about at your congregation's disposal?

2. In what ways has your congregation been good at deploying the resources God has given you? In what ways could you improve?

3. Why does fear often hinder good work in the church? What are we afraid of? How do we overcome this fear?

4. Describe how the master's reward to the two diligent slaves motivates you to live fearlessly.