

May 30, 2010  
**The Gift of ... Everything**  
Matthew 25:14-30

If I asked you to help me list the worst sins, what would you include? We might begin with the Ten Commandments and then added a few more. But would we include failing to use the potential God has given each of us?

This is a surprising parable. Remember the "talents" in this parable are not abilities, but a unit of money. But this parable is the origin of the sense of the word "talent" meaning "gift or skill." Because these characters received a rare, personal gift (in their specific case, money), the word "talent" has come to be used more generally referring to an innate, personal gift possessed by relatively few people. A person with a talent has an aptitude to do certain things. Talent (in the sense of natural ability or giftedness) is not the same as skill, which is a learned process, and one which is enhanced or inhibited by an underlying talent.

What is surprising is that the King, in this case, cares so much about how each person used his gift. After all the third man didn't do badly. The principal was all intact. He had lost nothing. He had used nothing for personal gain. Why is the King so upset?

Jesus tells this parable to help us appreciate that God has given us gifts. But what is it saying to us about how we use or don't use them? Can we go to hell for not using our "talents"? That seems pretty harsh? Let's try to make sense of it all ...<sup>1</sup>

*What are our "talents"?*

Everything we have is, of course, a gift from God. Here's a sampling of what some of the gifts God has given us include:

- The gift of being human. In *Genesis* we learned that God's imprint is upon us. The term "image of God" means that you are a divine imprint. The God of creation fashioned you to resemble his divine essence. You aren't a cheap reproduction, stamped out in some cosmic factory or clone machine. You are not a random collection of elements. Each of us is divinely designed gift in this world.
- Each of us is unique, unlike any other. And each of us has something to contribute to the world. Isn't it interesting how in any family, from the same parents the various children can be so different. Each has their unique personality. Each is unique - but equally - immeasurably - valuable. So it is in God's family, in the kingdom of God.
- We have unique personalities and unique talents, abilities, experiences, skills, and resources. This parable reminds us that it is God that has deposited gifts that differentiate each of us, gifts that all have the potential for good in God's world.

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks to Brian Stiller for some of the thoughts in this week's sermon.

Whatever we have going for us - our innate abilities, our education, our finances, our experiences - these are all gifts from God. We need to use them in His kingdom ...

- The older I get, the more I realize that one of the most important gifts in my life is time. Because of the busyness and pace of life, it's easier to send a check off to help a mission than to give of my time. But time is a gift God has given me. How do I use it?
- With my personality, gifts, and journey-through-life, there are opportunities that come to me and no one else. What do I do with it? There are people I've known for a lifetime - and people I only know for a few seconds. But I have the unique opportunity to bless these people in ways no one else ever will. Do I do that?
- Paul describes other gifts that God invests in our lives, special gifts of the Holy Spirit: *"A spiritual gift is given to each of us so we can help each other. To one person the Spirit gives the ability to give wise advice; to another the same Spirit gives a message of special knowledge. The same Spirit gives great faith to another, and to someone else the one Spirit gives the gift of healing. He gives one person the power to perform miracles, and another the ability to prophesy. He gives someone else the ability to discern whether a message is from the Spirit of God or from another spirit. Still another person is given the ability to speak in unknown languages, while another is given the ability to interpret what is being said. It is the one and only Spirit who distributes all these gifts. He alone decides which gift each person should have."* (1 Corinthians 12:7-11)

### *How NOT to use our gifts?*

One critical aspect of being a follower of Jesus is that God's Spirit is in us. He has given us these gifts we've just talked about. And we now have a responsibility to live out God's life in the world. We may not see ourselves as Billy Grahams or Mother Teresas, but that doesn't mean that in God's eyes we aren't just as important. Of the three levels of investment in this parable, you may not see yourself as the five talent or even the two talented person. Regardless, to each of us God has given something of value to be used for his kingdom.

So why is it so important? Why these harsh words? Let's start by looking at what Jesus does not say: He does not say that if we try to use our talents and it doesn't work out, we're in trouble. This guy just doesn't try to do anything. What annoys the King in the parable, and by analogy, God, is when we have talents and choose not to use them. In the words of an old proverb, "It's better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all." God has invested His love in us, given us these gifts we've talked about above ... and His passion is that we actually use them for His glory. If we don't use them, it's an offense to the Giver ...

Imagine some parents who really wanted to bless a young couple getting married. So they scrimped, saved, went without ... and for their wedding presented the couple with a new car. The deal was that the couple could use the car for whatever, but hopefully would use it to help out some people who didn't have transportation of their own. The couple just accepted it, matter of fact, and used it themselves. But they forgot about the bit about using it to bless others. An older person asked for a ride to a medical appointment - no, that was inconvenient. A teen needed a ride to a rugby game - no, that might get the car dirty. The parents, who had sacrificed

themselves to get the car were understandably a bit annoyed ... But the car is still intact; it's clean; they hadn't sold it to pay off other debts - isn't that enough?

God emptied Himself, became a human being, was willing to suffer and die upon the cross for us to give us the greatest gift of all - life ... new life. But what do we do with it?

CS Lewis once commented that "*The gates of hell are locked on the inside*" - it's not that God sends people to hell as much as that people choose - by how they live and what they desire most, to live in relationship with God - or not. If our lives are all focussed on "me" - and I'm not willing to work outside the box and use my talents, abilities, experiences, resources, and skills to bless others ... I have chosen a lonely, self-absorbed, ultimately meaningless existence. And there will come a time, in this life, or hereafter, when it will be a time of weeping and gnashing of teeth ... we'll have made our own hell, when it's just me and me alone.

It's interesting that this guy makes a feeble attempt to actually blame the king - God. Somehow it's God's fault that we have been given these gifts and I haven't done anything with them. Does that make sense? No ... But a part of being human is that temptation to blame someone else for all my problems rather than take responsibility for my own shortcomings.

### *How TO use our gifts*

The King congratulates two servants for their good work. At today's rates, the King entrusted the first servant with close to \$2 million. When the King returns from his travels and sees his servant has increased the capital, He is understandably excited and puts them in charge of a large enterprise and invites the fellow to celebrate with Him. He then looks at the second servant, who is also doubled his investment it gives the same congratulations. Both people, though given different amounts, are congratulated. What did they do?

We don't know why the servants are given different amounts. It really doesn't matter. The reality is that we are uniquely blessed. Each one is given a significant amount of cash and told to invest it. They take risks, make investments, and by so doing, are rewarded.

So what is Jesus saying?

He is challenging us about how we "play" at life? Do we always play it safe out of fear - like the third servant? Or are we willing to risk, like the first two people?

No, Jesus is not referring to our tolerance for risk related to our investment portfolios!

He is talking about how we use the unique capacities He has given us - our talents - as well as our skills, education, time, experiences, wisdom and abilities. Do we play it safe? Are we focussed in on ourselves and protecting ourselves? Are we afraid to "put ourselves out there"?

Or are we willing to risk? What happens if I do talk with that family member about my relationship with Jesus? Is that scary? Will I take the risk?

What happens if I do volunteer to work with children, youth, or seniors? Is that scary? Will I take the risk?

What if I do make a commitment to actually tithe or give a regular special offering to a ministry? Am I afraid? Or will I take the risk?

What if I have a dream to do something new and wonderful for the Lord? Is it frightening? Or will I take the risk?

Most of us worry SO much about things that never happen! When we risk, almost always things turn out just fine. And if we are risking in the name of the Lord, filled with His Spirit, using the gifts He has already given us ... what do we think is going to happen?

Almost inevitably when people risk - using the gifts God has given them - good things happen!

And if not ... so what? Notice that no one in the parable is punished because they risked ... and failed! The only person who suffers is the one who would not risk at all.

There is another truth here. In a very real sense, God needs us. A critic once snipe at Stradivarius - the great violin maker - *"If God really wanted violins he would've made them himself."* Stradivarius responded, *"No, not even God can make my violins without Stradivarius."* In a sense he was right. It's not that God cannot, for there is nothing God cannot do. But God created us humans to be God's co-managers. God chooses to have great violins made by great violin makers ... people like you and I.

Take an inventory of your gifts. Keep it simple. How has God blessed you? Don't be silly, wring your hands, and pretend you have nothing to offer. To do so is to deny God's goodness in your life! Ask some godly friends to help you if you need to. Then ask, *"Lord, what is there that you've given me that I'm hiding? What am I not using? What can I do?"* Again, good godly friends can help you work through this.

Then talk with the Lord about it. Identify one or two gifts - abilities, opportunities, time, financial resources - and begin to plan ways that they might be used. Don't allow past failures to determine how much you're willing to risk. Remember that your gifts are gifts of the Holy Spirit, given to you by God, and He will empower you, inspire you, and guide you as you use them for his kingdom. As God calls, he also equips. As He equips, He also calls.

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