

## DEVELOPING GIFTS Matthew 25: 14-30 (Luke 19:11-27)

### 1. THE PARABLE OF THE TALENTS

The parable of the talents is similar to the parable of the pounds in Luke, but it is not a retelling of the story. There are significant differences between both parables:

#### **MATTHEW**

Man (merchant)  
Journey  
Talents  
5, 2, 1 talents to 3 men  
Returned and rewarded  
2 servants  
Punished lazy servant

#### **LUKE**

Nobleman  
Journey for a kingdom  
Pound (Mna) 6000 to talent.  
Citizens send delegation refusing his kingship  
10 pounds divided between 10 men.  
Returned and rewarded servants materially: 10 cities, five cities. king and slaughtered his enemies and the servant who buried pound.

In 1<sup>st</sup> Century AD there were many wealthy landholders. These men were often merchants who travelled throughout the Mediterranean world and even went as far as Africa and India on trading expeditions. If the trading enterprise included the Gulf States, North Africa and India, a journey could last for three to five years. The wealth accumulated during this period would be enormous. Pepper and spices from India would be resold in the Roman Empire for many times their original value.

The landowner in the story wants his money to work for him and multiply during his absence. He distributes talents to his small workforce according to their respective capacities: five talents to one man, two to another, and one to his least able servant. He commands them to use the money during his absence and make a profit. On his return, he calls them to account for their use of the talents. The servant with five talents and the servant with two talents have been industrious and made a 100% profit; the remaining servant has buried his talent and is justly punished by his irate master.

The talent was not a coin but a weight. Some scholars argue that the talent weighed 41 kg; others suggest the much lower figure of 20.05 kg. In monetary terms, the talent was a weight of coins in gold, silver or copper.

**Golden Aureus (aurei)** Julius Caesar fixed the weight of an Aureus at 126.03 grs in 49 BC.. Augustus and Nero reduced this to 115 grs.

**Silver Denarius.** 25 Denarii to an Aureus.

**Copper Sestertius.** worth one sixth of a Denarius.

**Quadrans** worth quarter of the value of Sestertius.

In Matthew 25:27, the word translated 'money' is the Greek 'silver' (Gk argurion). It would seem, therefore, that the master gave his servants Talents of silver coin. This may not have had the value of a gold talent, but it would have been a small fortune in

1<sup>st</sup> Century AD. A denarius was the average daily wage for a workman (Matthew 20:1-16).

The parable of the talents was told during the Passion Week. Christ was preparing his disciples for his death and resurrection. He was returning to the Father and had bestowed gifts on each of them according to their varying capacities. On his return, they would give an account of their stewardship.

## **2. THE BEQUEATHAL OF TALENTS**

**2.1 THE ORIGIN OF TALENTS.** The merchant gave his servants the talents. All our variegated gifts come from God (James 1:17). There are several Greek words that used in the New Testament to describe 'gifts':

**CHARISMA** Gift of grace. Used of the gifts of the Spirit in 1 Corinthians 12:4-11.

**DOREA** (grace according to the measure of Christ's gift' (Ephesians 4:7). This word denotes a free, gratuitous gift.

**DOMA** a concrete, established gift (Ephesians 4:8).

**MERISMOS** signifies a division/distribution of the Holy Spirit (Hebrews 2:4): 'distributions of the Holy Spirit.

The gifts of the Spirit in 1 Corinthians 12 are not natural endowments but are supernatural in origin. Other gifts, however, relate to abilities that are latent within us that need to be awakened and empowered by the Spirit. A gift is only useful when it is energised by the Spirit of God. The dynamic combination of gift and the energising of the Spirit constitute a ministry.

**2.2 THE VARIETY OF TALENTS.** The master distributed the talents according to the capacity of each of his servants. In the Church we are all equals and are therefore not distinguished by our position or abilities but by our characters. There will always be a disparity in the gifts and abilities of the Lord's people. Our reward is not based on our gifts and status in the church, but on our willingness to develop and use the abilities God has given us. Our faithfulness and reliability are more important to God than our talent. The reward for the two faithful servants in this parable was exactly the same: *"Well done good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master"* (vv 21, 23).

God's plan and purpose for us can be summarised in this way:

\* **He chose us** (Ephesians 1:4).

\* **He separated us** (Gal.1:15, 16)

\* **He made us** (Psalm 139:13-16)

\* **He gifted us** (Ephesians 2:10). 'Workmanship' is the Gk. word 'poima' from which we derive our English word 'poem'.

'Created' (Gk. katizo), used for founding a city or colony.

**2.3 THE PURPOSE OF TALENTS.** There Lord wants to profit from his investment in us. The Lord has relinquished responsibility for ministry to the Church. Our talents are not for personal glory or advance, but for the glory of his kingdom. He has placed us in the Body so that we can fulfil his purpose. Gifts are always given

by God for the edification of others (1 Corinthians 12:7; 14:12) and their development (Ephesians 4:12). The Greek word for 'edification' (Gk. Oikodome) is a compound word meaning to build a home (Gk. demo (build) oikos (home)).

### **3. THE DEVELOPMENT OF TALENTS**

#### **3.1. VALUE CHARACTER ABOVE GIFT.**

\* **SERVANTHOOD.** Jesus describes the men as 'slaves' (Gk. doulos). Gifts and position in the Church are never for our own aggrandisement. We are ultimately the servants of Christ and of one another. Character and motive are the critical ingredients in the use of our gifts in the church.

\* **RELIABILITY.** The quality applauded by the master was trustworthiness. Reliability in the exercise of our duties is critical and commended throughout the New Testament (Matthew 9:37, 38; Luke 10:2; 16:2; 1 Corinthians 4:1,2; 5:19,20).

The long delay in the master's return tested the tenacity of his slaves. The two rewarded slaves never lost enthusiasm. God will test our calling and develop character by putting obstacles in our way.

\* **WORK.** Hard work is a key factor in the character of an entrepreneur. The two successful slaves were distinguished by their industry. No gift is ever developed without hard work. William Barclay, commenting on this parable, writes: *'Men are not equal in talent; but they can be equal in effort'* (William Barclay, The Daily Study Bible: The Gospel According to Matthew, p323).

Hard work is commended throughout Scripture. The creation mandate for human life stipulated six days of labour and a Sabbath of rest (Exodus 20:8-11). Jesus encouraged his disciples to pray for 'labourers' (Gk. erchates) in his harvest field (Matthew 9:37, 38; Luke 10:2). The common designate for 'work' is the Greek 'ergon' (1 Corinthians 15:58; 16:10; 2 Thessalonians 3:8). Another important word that signifies diligent, determined labour is 'kapos' (1 Corinthians 3:8, 15, 58' 2 Corinthians 6:5; 10:15; 11:23, 27).

**3.2. IDENTIFY YOUR TALENTS.** It is critical to identify our gifts. Our priority should be the development of our principle gifts. The Church is often organised like a corporation. We have a certain number of positions in the church, e.g., Sunday school teacher, youth worker, and we attempt to recruit people to fill these roles. Admittedly we must attempt to find personnel for the various ministries in a church, but these should be filled by people with the gifts appropriate to the ministry. Moreover, the primary commitment of leadership should be the development of the Body.

**3.3 BE ENTREPRENEURIAL IN THE USE OF YOUR TALENTS.** Gifts will atrophy if they are not used. Paul tells Timothy to stir up his gifts: 'rekindle (lit. 'fan into flame') the gift of God that is within you' (2 Timothy 4:14; 2 Timothy 1:6) We should actively seek to use our gifts in the service of the Lord.

#### **3.4 ACTIVELY SEEK TRAINING TO DEVELOP YOUR TALENT.**

\* **TRAINING.** Training is often required if we are to develop our gifts. An athlete may be genetically gifted at running but he will never achieve his potential

without training. Similarly, we must be proactive in seeking the appropriate training. The Western Church is rich in training resources:

- \* Literature
- \* Audio recordings (1 Pod)
- \* CD/DVD
- \* TV
- \* Internet
- \* College Courses

\* **MENTORING.** Seek a mentor who can encourage you to use your gifts. Gifts are not static but develop with training and practice. The elected contestants in the 'X' Factor are generally very gifted singers, but with specialist training they make significant improvements. Honing a gift requires training and accountability

**3.5 INFORM LEADERS THAT YOU WOULD LIKE TO USE YOUR GIFTS.** Some people are so passive they're not willing to approach leaders and tell them they would like to use their gifts. Leaders should provide a **reality check, encouragement and accountability.**

**3.6 PRAY FOR THE DEVELOPMENT AND USE OF YOUR GIFTS AND SOLICIT THE PRAYERS OF OTHERS' TO THIS END** (Ephesians 6:18-20). Prayer cells and partnerships can be organised to pray for gift use and development in the church.

**3.7 RECOGNISE THAT YOU ARE ACCOUNTABLE TO GOD FOR THE USE OF YOUR TALENTS.** (Titus2:11-14; 1 John 3:1-3).

#### **4. THE ACCOUNTABILITY FOR TALENTS.**

The third man of the trio was the least able; he only received one talent. He was also the least enterprising and decided to bury his talent. Rather than admit culpability for his failure, he blamed the master: *“Master, I knew you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed, so I was afraid and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours”* (vv 24, 25).

The master was justly incensed by this excuse and exposed its absurdity. He reprimanded the man and rebutted his criticism by telling him he could have could have invested the talent with the bankers and made profit. His passivity and laziness were regarded by the master as 'wickedness'. The sin of omission is very serious:

*‘This was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but they did not aid the poor and the needy’ (Ezekiel 16: 49).*

The future judgement will be based on the validity of our works (Matthew 25:31-46). Passivity is not the mark of a Christian. Sadly, it is estimated that only 10% of people are active in the Church; the rest polish pews.

*'It is astounding how much dead weight there is in the average congregation. Dead timber produces no fruit and dead weight must be dragged along. Somewhere along the way we have missed the very essence of the Christian concept and the result is that we have the greatest accumulation of unused talent and the richest deposit of untouched ability of any group of people on earth. If we are going to be honest in our plea for restoration it is time that we begin to revolutionize our thinking so that every soldier will don the armour and every child of God will be active in ministering'*

The Greek word translated 'banker' is 'prapeza'. The word is derived from the word 'table' (Gk. prapezites), a compound made up of 'four' and 'footed' (Gk. petra four meza legs) denoting the legs of the table. The use of a derivative of 'table' to describe a banker relates to the practice of money changers to use a table for their trade. The money changer would not only change currency but also lend and borrow at interest.

#### **4.1 REASONS FOR INERTIA.**

\* **INFERIORITY.** Some Christians have gifts but are neutralised by their own inferiority and feeling of unworthiness.

\* **IGNORANCE.** People often regard church as a society or club run by religious professionals. The clergy/laity divide has been established over 2000 years. The 1<sup>st</sup> Century church was governed by a plurality of elders and all members were required to use their gifts. By the second century, clericalism began to emerge. A form of leadership called the 'monarchical episcopate began to emerge but its acceptance was not universal. The leader of the church was regarded as the 'bishop' and the elders were instructed to relate to him as the apostles to Christ. The monarchical episcopate did not immediately exclude ordinary people from ministry, but it signified a widening gap between a professional clergy and the people (Gk. laos/laity). During the Medieval era when Catholicism reigned supreme in Europe, ordinary people were banished from ministry and were not permitted to read the Scriptures. Ministry was dominated by an ordained elite whose primary functions were to offer mass on the high altar, hear confession, give absolution, and impose suitable penance on parishioners. Ministry was religious theatre watched from afar by an awed laity. The fact that all religious liturgy was in Latin further distanced religious worship and ministry from the masses.

The Protestant Reformation put the Bible back into the hands of ordinary people and encouraged vernacular languages in church services. The truth that a person is justified by faith did away with the idea of a mediatory priesthood. Christ was regarded as the only way to the Father; forgiveness was not given by priestly absolution but as the free gift of God through Christ. The Reformation may have weakened the grip of a religious elite on the ministry of the Church, but it didn't destroy the system: the altar was replaced by the pulpit and the priest by the pastor. The Reformation reintroduced the concept of the priesthood of believers, but interpreted this as direct access to God. The ecclesiological (relating to the Church) significance of the concept that all people are priests and therefore qualified to minister in the Church was largely ignored. The clergy/laity divide was retained and ordinary people were excluded from ministry.

Movements like the Apostolic Church rediscovered the truth of the Body of Christ and the 'priesthood of all believers'. Ministry was not regarded as the exclusive preserve of a religious elite but the vocation of each member of the Body of Christ.

Indeed, if each member was not functioning the Body of Christ would be tragically impaired. With this discovery came the realisation that leadership in the Church was not monotypic (made up of one form of gifting or type of leadership) but a plurality of ministries: apostle, prophet, evangelist, teacher, pastor and a huge range of supplementary gifts.

This paradigm of church has universal acceptance in all main denominations. The Anglican evangelical, John Stott, is even more outspoken. Commenting on Ephesians 4:11-13, he writes:

**Here is incontrovertible evidence that the New Testament envisages ministry not as the prerogative of a clerical elite but as the privileged calling of all the people of God. Thank God that in our generation this Biblical vision of ‘every member-ministry’ is taking a firm hold in the church.**

**What model of church, church, then should we keep in our minds? The traditional model is that of a pyramid, with the pastor perched precariously on its pinnacle, like a little pope in his own church, while the laity are arrayed beneath him in serried ranks of inferiority. It is a totally unbiblical image, because the New Testament envisages not a single pastor with a docile flock but both a plural oversight and ‘an every member ministry’.**

**If the 16<sup>th</sup> century rediscovered the ‘priesthood of all believers’ (every Christian enjoying through Christ direct access to God), perhaps the 20<sup>th</sup> century will recover ‘the ministry of all believers’ (every Christian receiving through Christ a privileged ministry to men).<sup>1</sup>**

A traditional, archaic and ultimately unscriptural paradigm of ministry can create passivity.

\* **OPPOSITION.** An insecure leadership will often deliberately marginalise gifted people. The sad reality is that leaders often maintain their positions of power by adopting a paternalistic approach to rank and file church members. There is a huge gulf between ‘paternalism’ and ‘spiritual parenting’. It is the responsibility of church leaders to encourage the gifts of members. Often the gift grid lock in the Church is caused by the insecurity and fear of leaders. What will happen to me if some of my members develop into better leaders, preachers and teachers? We can become like jealous kings who exile potential rivals. A king who wobbles on his throne will hold on to it desperately.

The primary purpose of New Testament leadership was to bring people to spiritual maturity, maintain order and orthodoxy in the Church, and emancipate the members into their true gifting and vocation. The function of leadership, therefore, is

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<sup>1</sup> Joh R W Stott, God’s New Society, pp 167, 168

analogous to parenting.<sup>2</sup> Any loving father is both a character coach and a custodian of his child's talents. He will love, educate, discipline and encourage his child in order to bring him/her to maturity and usefulness. A dangerously insecure and possessive parent often stunts the growth of a child by attempting to maintain dependency. The parent always wants to be the dominant person in the child's life and is threatened by any demonstration of independence. Sadly, I have met many leaders who exhibit the traits of the insecure parent. They regard gifted members as a serious threat to their position and deviously attempt to restrict their usefulness and influence in the church. These men and women are tragic figures. They usually lack the self awareness and honesty to confront their own insecurity and become oppressors of the children of God, vindicating their autocratic style of leadership with empty justifications and rationalisations. The culling process leaves them with a church of docile pew minders who show little evidence of flair, initiative or independent thought.

Moses was secure in his leadership because he was utterly confident in his vocation. I often wonder if 'call' is the best way to describe his debut as Israel's greatest law giver and deliverer. Read the account of his call and commission in the early chapters of Exodus and you will quickly doubt if 'call' adequately conveys the fearsome, uncompromising intervention of God in his life. Moses was dragged kicking, fighting and protesting into his new career as Israel's deliverer. He had already settled into a comfortable routine as shepherd, husband and father in the desert kingdom of Midian. He was on excellent terms with his VIP father-in-law, was married to a dusky beauty queen, and was the proud father of a baby boy. What more could he want from life? God's sudden appearance in a burning bush had turned his cosy world upside down. Every attempt that he made to wriggle out of God's call on his life was countered by a Divine argument. God grabbed him by the scruff of his neck and was dragging him towards Egypt and his destiny. Goodbye comfortable life. Goodbye early retirement plan. Goodbye mediocrity. The father of one son became the parent of a million troublesome, rebellious and obdurate children. God tipped him unceremoniously out of the comfort zone and into the bloody savagery of the battlefield. Later, when Moses was the established leader of Israel, God decided on a creative plan of delegation. He took the spiritual anointing for leadership that distinguished Moses and distributed it among seventy of his fellow leaders. A well meaning supporter was so concerned that seventy others leaders were prophesying that he reported the incident to Moses. Joshua's response was to forbid the leaders to prophesy, but Moses corrected his misplaced loyalty with the comment: "Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his spirit on them" (Numbers 11:28-30).

This should be out approach as leaders: not the jealous and fiercely insecure monopoly on power, but the willing acceptance of the servant's role and the desire to encourage his spiritual children to excel.

God is the supreme delegator. CS Lewis wrote that God 'seems to do nothing of Himself which he cannot possibly delegate to his creatures'. This should be the attitude of a mature leadership. We are not diminished by delegation as if we are beggaring ourselves by giving away our wealth for free. On the contrary, delegation releases us into true and mature leadership. True delegation is the recognition of the

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<sup>2</sup> 1 Cor. 4:15; Gal. 4:19.

gifts and ministries of others and the determination to encourage their exercise and development.

\* **LAZINESS.** This was the problem of the slave in the parable. He couldn't be bothered to invest or trade with his talent. He preferred a predictable and passive life to one of costly service. He was blind to the fact that he would have to give an account to his master. Paradoxically, he described him as a 'harsh' man and confessed to being afraid of him, but his action implied the opposite.

**4.2 THE DAY OF RECKONING.** The slave was severely punished for his maladministration. We too will have to give a reckoning for our actions.

The Christian has escaped judgement (John 5:20; Revelation 20:11) but we are still accountable for our actions. The Bible teaches that we must all appear before the judgement seat of Christ (Romans 14:10; 2 Corinthians 5:10). The Greek word translated 'judgement seat' is 'bema'<sup>3</sup>. Originally it denoted a raised platform that was used in public orations on Pnyx Hill, Athens, but it soon acquired a judicial function. In Greek jurisprudence, two bemas were provided: one for the judge and the other for the accused. Paul uses this image to describe Christ's judgement of our works. He will judge us for what we have done with our lives. Our future will be determined by our past. Our experience will be analogous to that of the contenders in the reality TV show 'Apprentice'. Our performance will be assessed by a far a greater personality than Alan Suger and the stakes will be much higher.

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<sup>3</sup> Bematos tou christou