

Talents and Judgment

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A couple of weeks ago, as I was finishing the sermon on the coming of the Lord that I preached last week, I did something that's very unusual for me. I looked at the finished product and I said, "This sermon is too short!" After all, I'd taken that entire sermon from the portion of Scripture that begins in Matthew 24:36 and ends in Matthew 25:13. It's a very orderly, very logical explanation by Jesus of what was going to happen at the end of time, and basically, all I had to do was explain it and add some extra illustrations, and I could preach the same sermon Jesus did.

However, when I got to Matthew 25:13, I realized that there was a problem. Even though I'd used my allotted space on the paper and therefore my allotted time, I'd only covered three of the five main points of Jesus' sermon. I wasn't really happy about that; after all, if the Lord said it, I ought to be repeating it. I briefly considered just turning the whole thing into one hour-long epic sermon, but I realized that if I did that after four years of half-hour sermons, I'd be personally responsible for the burning of every pot roast in the congregation. I decided instead that even though Jesus got through the whole sermon in one session, I needed two to get the job done, which brings us to this morning.

Of course, it's important to look at Jesus' words here not simply for the sake of logical completeness, but for the sake of our souls. In this text, Jesus reveals something of eternal significance. He tells us what He expects to see out of us that will make the difference between eternal life and eternal destruction. Even though every person who will be saved will be saved by the grace of Jesus, that doesn't mean that we can expect to float through the pearly gates on a pink cloud. Instead, if we want to get to heaven, we're going to have to work. Let's consider, then, talents and judgment.

Talents.

The parable of the talents begins with the story of **THE TRUST** given by a master to his servants. This portion of the account appears in Matthew 25:14-15. Today, when we hear the word "talent", we think of someone's gifts or abilities, but the word didn't have that meaning 2000 years ago. Instead, a talent was a measure of weight. It was supposed to represent how much a man could carry, and it was probably around 80 pounds. These servants, then, would have been entrusted with talents of precious metal, either gold or silver, a considerable amount of money. Although the text does not say so here, the servants understood that their master meant for them to use the money to make a profit.

Of course, there's a reason why "talent" has shifted meaning from weight to ability, because in this parable, it's our abilities that Jesus is really talking about. Just like the master gave the servants varying amounts of money, God has given each of us gifts that vary in degree and kind. We are differently blessed with ability, money, and personal situation, but every one of us has some gift from God somewhere in our lives. Just like the master expected the servants to use their talents to make money, God expects us to use our talents to glorify Him, and that's something all of us can do.

Next, we learn about **THE SERVANTS' ACTIONS**. These are described in Matthew 25:16-18. Ultimately, what's behind this section of Scripture is a decision that the text doesn't even describe. When the five-talent and two-talent servants decided to use their money in trade, they were taking a risk. As we all know, the open market doesn't come with guarantees, and they could just as easily have lost everything instead of earning more money for their master. However, they didn't let this risk deter them from earning a reward. The one-talent servant, however, made the opposite decision. He was so afraid of losing his talent that he chose to bury it instead of risking it in the market.

Likewise, friends, there are risks associated with using our gifts for God. If we volunteer to serve publicly in the assembly, we may embarrass ourselves publicly. If we try to teach our neighbor about the gospel, it may come out wrong and we may look like an idiot. If we contribute money to the Lord's work, we may need that money for something else down the line. Whenever we stretch ourselves, whenever we move outside of our comfort zones, there's always a risk associated with that. However, if we shy away from putting ourselves on the line for the Lord, if we refuse to try anything in His service that may end badly, we're doing exactly what the one-talent servant did. We must embrace the risk instead.

We learn why from what the master says to the **FAITHFUL SERVANTS**. This exchange is recorded in Matthew 25:19-23. In this section, we have to pay particular attention both to the differences and to the similarities between the five-talent and the two-talent servants. The differences are obvious. The five-talent servant began with five and finished with ten. The two-talent servant began with two and finished with four. However, their master was equally pleased with them both. We don't see him getting on the two-talent servant for not showing up with ten talents. Instead, it's clear that he lived up to his master's expectations because he did the best he could with what he had been given.

Thankfully, God has the same expectations for us. Not everybody in the kingdom has the same measure of ability. God has given some of us a little, and He has given some of us a lot. However, He only looks for us to produce according to the talents we have been given. We don't have to be fruitful on the same level as someone who had much more opportunity to be fruitful than we did. As long as we live up to the gifts we have received, He will be pleased.

Sadly, in the parable, the master was not pleased with **THE UNFAITHFUL SERVANT**. We see their conversation presented in Matthew 25:24-27. It's obvious from this retelling that the one-talent servant knows he's in trouble. He appears before the master, and the first words out of his mouth are excuses. As he tells it, it's really the master's fault that he didn't do anything with the money. The master expected too much, and it scared the servant into doing nothing. Of course, the master isn't buying any of this. He points out that if the servant knew about his high expectations, that should have frightened him not into inaction, but into action. The real problem is not the terrifying master nor his unrealistic goals, but the servant's own laziness and indeed wickedness.

I fear that on the day of judgment, when a lot of Christians stand before the Lord, the first words out of their mouths are going to be excuses too. The Lord gave them their salvation, they sat on it like a hen with one egg, and they never fell away, but they never did a lick in the Lord's service, either. And these Christians will talk about how hard it was to work in the kingdom and how difficult it was to save the lost and so on, so that their failure becomes God's fault too. Brethren, it didn't work in the parable, and it won't work on the day of judgment. God's expectations for our conduct are spelled out in Scripture. They are high expectations, but we can meet them, and woe unto us if we do not!

We see just how woeful things will be in **THE RESULT** of this parable. Jesus describes it in Matthew 25:28-30. The unfaithful servant is stripped of the talent that he had hoarded so unwisely, it is given to the ten-talent servant, and the unfaithful servant himself is cast out of the household. Jesus describes this by saying that to those who have, more will be given, while those who don't have will lose even what they have.

I was actually thinking about this parable at the Revelation study at the Williamses' the other night. There are several folks in this congregation who need some more Bible in their lives. I can tell they need more because they seem content to stay where they are and do nothing instead of rising up and being real workers for the Lord. I haven't seen a single one of those brethren at these studies. Instead, the Christians who have been coming are the ones who are already committed, who already know their Bibles pretty well, but are eager to learn more anyway. Do you see it, friends? To those who have, more is being given, while those who do not have are sitting at home and watching TV. Each one of us needs to take stock of our lives to make sure that we are numbered with the spiritual haves, not the spiritual have-nots.

Judgment

All of this comes into much clearer focus with Jesus' description of the day of judgment, which begins with His portrayal of **THE THRONE SCENE**. We see this in Matthew 25:31-33. Here, Jesus is no longer talking about virgins or servants or any of that other stuff; instead, He tells it like it is. He's going to come with His holy angels, sit in judgment on mankind, and divide all the people who have ever lived up like sheep and goats—sheep to the right, goats to the left. Every one of us is going to be in that crowd somewhere. Every one of us is going to get sorted out to where we belong. We can't choose to escape it. All we can choose now is whether we want to be a sheep or a goat.

We learn what it takes to be a sheep from Jesus' foretelling of His conversation with **THE RIGHTEOUS**. This discussion is recorded in Matthew 25:34-40. The basis of this conversation is not at all what many Christians would seem to expect. We know from other places that it's important to avoid sin and that it's important to submit in all things to the authority of God, but that's not what Jesus highlights here. Instead, He speaks of the way the righteous have treated Him. They have provided for His food and drink and clothing. They have welcomed Him when they didn't know Him. They've visited Him when He was sick or in prison. One can almost hear the wheels turning in the heads of the righteous at this point. They don't remember doing any of these things, and even though they like the result Jesus is reaching, they don't understand how He's getting there. That's when Jesus gets to the punch line. He tells them that He's not talking about the way that they've literally treated Him. He's talking about the way they've treated other Christians. In His eyes, all the kindness they bestowed on their brethren was kindness they bestowed on Him.

Brethren, this needs to be the core of our conception of righteousness. Jesus says in Matthew 22 that the two greatest commandments are to love God and love one's neighbor, and in a way, this passage embraces both. It's important that we come to church. It's important that we don't practice sin. However, those things are just the springboard for what is truly important—the way that we treat one another. Every one of us needs to be consistently in the habit of looking for ways to express love to the other members of this church. When we do that, when we care for one another and meet one another's needs, we are doing nothing less than caring for the needs of the Lord.

The problem **THE UNRIGHTEOUS** have is that they didn't understand this. We see their dialogue with Jesus presented in Matthew 25:41-46. Countless souls are going to be sentenced to eternal destruction on that day, and although most of those people won't be Christians, some of them will be. Those will be Christians who didn't get it. Maybe they showed up for services three times a week. Maybe they never said a single cuss word or took a single sip of alcohol. Maybe they knew the Bible forward and backward. It won't matter, because despite ample opportunity, they failed to be a blessing to their brethren. Friends, that could be us. If we are unloving or just plain lazy about caring for one another, we will certainly be lost. Let's treat one another like we would Jesus, so that we can inherit everlasting life.