

## **“Use It or Lose It”**

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11-11-18 Consecration Sunday

Based upon Matt. 25:14-30 (NRSV); Romans 1, 3-8 (*The Message* Translation)

Imagine you won the lottery. What would you do with the money? Would you buy a new house or travel around the world? Would you set up a philanthropic organization to help the needy, or fund research to cure diseases? Would you try to double your money on the stock market, use it to run for office, or run away to live in peace on a tropical island far away from all things political? The servants in today’s parable were basically put in this position. Their master gave them each a crazy big amount of money. A talent in Jesus’ day was the equivalent of 6,000 denarii. To give you some perspective on what that means, laborers were typically paid a single denarii for a whole day’s work, so that means that the servant who received a single talent received the equivalent of 20-years’ worth of salary on the spot, or about \$350,000 before taxes by today’s standards for minimum wage laborers. You can do the math for what that means for the others who received two and five talents a piece. They had truly won the lottery in the sense of having more money in hand than they might ever have seen in their lifetimes. Now whose money it was is not quite clear. The NRSV says they were “entrusted” with the money, but the verb in Greek is just “give,” and the text doesn’t mention any kind of contractual agreement. So it could have been theirs to manage or theirs to keep. In any case, even if the money was theirs only to manage and not to keep, it was more money for the servants to play with than any of their contemporaries could imagine.

According to Matthew, the master did not give the three the same amount. Instead he distributed the money “according to the servants’ abilities.” Whether he was assessing them based upon their trustworthiness, work ethic, financial skills, social connections, or something else is anyone’s guess. All we know is that the two who had the most money had in themselves or their lives what they needed to double that wealth. The third servant, perhaps because he had the least, opted to protect what he had been given by burying the talent in the ground. When the master returned, he praised the profitable servants and penalized the one who had not lost or gained a penny, by giving his reward to the one who needed the money the least. And the moral of the story is... What is the moral of the story? Is it that the rich will always get richer? Because although that may be true, it doesn’t feel very Christian. Is it that we are supposed to risk losing the stuff we’re entrusted with by others? Because that doesn’t feel like good stewardship as we understand it. Is it that God is harsh or unfair or both? Because that’s not the loving and generous God we know in Christ.

For people like us who have been taught that saving our resources is both a responsible and wise thing to do to guarantee future security, this is a tough and confusing parable. Actually, this parable is one of a trio of tough and confusing eschatological parables, or parables about the final Judgment Day, which Matthew bunched together in Chapter 25. The first parable is the parable of the bridesmaids, who doze off and end up missing the wedding because no one will share with them the oil they need for their lamps at the end. The third is the parable about the separation of the sheep and the goats according to who took care of the least of these. Although

social justice Protestants like us tend to like that third one because caring for the needy is near and dear to our hearts, few Christians are as enamored with the first two parables. They just seem to contradict too much of what we understand about God and the Gospel. But if we can set aside our outrage and confusion long enough to study them, then we see that they don't really do this. Hidden within them are lessons that are both very true to the God and Gospel we know, and very important for us as disciples to remember. They just need a little unpacking.

The first thing to keep in mind with all three parables is that Matthew included them in his gospel to motivate his readers to become better disciples. He didn't want them becoming complacent, thinking that they could kick back and do whatever they wanted to because they had been saved. He wanted them to serve Christ actively and faithfully. So he created this triptych of unsettling parables about judgment to give them the incentive to do just that. The lesson of the first parable, in a nut shell, is that you can't borrow faith from someone else. You have to actively nurture your relationship with God and be prepared for Christ's return at any time. The lesson of the third is that faith is about serving those in need, not just professing faith and resting on your salvation or your laurels. The one in the middle that we heard today in a nutshell is "use it or lose it." But that doesn't help us to understand fully what "it" is because there are good reasons to believe that Matthew had more in mind than just money.

You see if all he had cared about was how we use our money, Matthew could have used another version of this parable that was circulating at the time, but didn't make it into the Bible. In that version, which according to church historian Eusebius was in a document called the *Gospel of the Hebrews*, the one with five talents squandered his money like the prodigal son. In that version, only the servant who grew his wealth was rewarded. But Matthew didn't use that version, nor did he use the one Luke did, where ten servants get equal shares of less money expressly to manage for their Lord. Instead, Matthew recorded this version, where the amounts of money are huge, yet distributed inequitably. This tells scholars that Matthew did not intend this simply to be a lesson in the stewardship of money. The talents must stand allegorically for something else extraordinary that God has given us. It can't be salvation, however, because God gives that equally to all in Christ regardless of our abilities. So the talents must stand for something else.

Most scholars have argued throughout the ages that the talents stand for talents, in the sense of our gifts and abilities, not our money. Although the original word "talent" was actually a weight measurement, the English word "talent" was created in the 15<sup>th</sup> Century based on this parable because the people then believed that talents stood allegorically for gifts. As Paul affirms in the classic translation of the same *Romans* text we heard in *The Message* translation this morning, "We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us." Some people have a lot of gifts, others a few. However much we have, God wants us to maximize what we have been given, not to do the equivalent of burying them in the ground.

This is an important message. Our gifts are meant to be used, even if it feels risky to us to do so. But since we can't really double our God-given gifts by using the ones that we have, translating "talents" as "gifts" still does not resolve all of the ambiguities in this parable. So other scholars, including an Australian theologian named Ben Chenoweth, have argued that the talents

stand for the “knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of God.”<sup>1</sup> This is the special gift that twelve chapters earlier Jesus told his disciples he was giving them. They were told how to understand parables that others could not. They were shown who Jesus was and how he wanted them to live. To have this knowledge and this connection with God through Christ was like winning the lottery. It meant they could dwell with God in the kingdom on earth as well as in heaven. It also meant that they had the ability to make that kingdom grow.

Chenoweth argues that this parable is about using the knowledge we have been given to invest in the growth of the kingdom of God on earth. If the first parable is a lesson in being prepared, then this lesson explains how to do that, by increasing one’s knowledge of God and investing in God’s way, so as to profit the kingdom for Jesus’ sake. Then the third parable tells us that one of the best ways to invest and grow the kingdom is by caring for the least of these.

There is no way of knowing whether Chenoweth is right or the scholars who see talents as talents are. But I don’t think we have to choose to get the message. This isn’t a parable about a harsh, unfair God, or about how the rich keep getting richer. This is a parable about our recognizing that we are in an extraordinary position thanks to the grace of God in Jesus Christ. Not only have we been saved, and given mercy and grace beyond our wildest imagining, we also all have been given personal talents and gifts, knowledge and access, power and purpose, future security and lasting hope. We may not have the same number or amounts of each of these things. Some of us have more gifts, some more knowledge, some more faith or more power. But these are all gifts from God that have been entrusted to us so that we can glorify God and magnify our master’s kingdom on earth.

Eugene Peterson, an inspiring Presbyterian pastor and author from our area, who died just a few weeks ago, summarized this lesson in his modern paraphrase of Paul’s words in *Romans* this way: “So here’s what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday ordinary life – your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life – and place it before God as an offering.... It’s important that you not misinterpret yourselves as people who are bringing this goodness to God. No. God brings it all to you.”<sup>2</sup> That’s what we are recognizing and doing on Consecration Sunday today. We are recognizing that we have won the lottery in Christ in more ways than one. This is God’s doing, not our own. And we are committing ourselves in all aspects to serving Christ through the body he created that we call the Church. We commit a percentage of our financial resources because whether we have talent’s worth of money or not, we recognize that the money we have is ultimately God’s not our own. We commit to use our time and our talents to serve Christ, because that is how we make sure we have enough oil and serve the people Christ wants us to serve. We give our hearts and our minds and our souls, our ordinary and walking-around lives to God because God gave them to us first.

There is some risk in doing this always. In order to use our God-given talents, we may have to step outside our comfort zones. In order to magnify the kingdom on earth, we may have

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<sup>1</sup> Chenoweth, Ben, “*Identifying the Talents: Contextual Clues for the Interpretation of the Parable of the Talents (Matthew 25:14-30)*,” TYNDALE BULLETIN 56.1 (2005), 61-72.

<sup>2</sup> Peterson, Eugene H., *The Message: The New Testament Psalms and Proverbs in Contemporary Language*, (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1996), 331.

to invest our hearts, minds, time, and financial resources differently. But keeping what we've been given to ourselves, burying it, doesn't do anyone good, including ourselves. You see your bulletin cover today? That money was money that someone in the First Century buried to keep safe and then either died before he could use it or forgot about it. That's not what we want to happen to the Gospel or the kingdom of God. Talents of all kinds need to be shared and invested to grow, not planted.

In the Old Testament, the word that is used for the glory of God is *kabod*.<sup>3</sup> Although we think of the glory of God in terms of holiness and honor, truth or radiant grace, the word in Hebrew conveys weight more than radiance. It means heavy. Thus when applied to God, the "kabod of God" is the something like the *gravitas* of God, the intense weightiness of all the goodness and righteousness and love of God. A talent, as said before, was also a measure of weight, rather than currency. It was a chunk of silver or gold so heavy that it weighed about as much as an average adult male. Combine these concepts together, and it's almost as if these words are affirming what we know to be true in Christ, that we, who have been made in the image of God, all have been given about one talent's worth of the glory of God in ourselves and our gifts. We have been given this in trust, but ultimately what we do with it is up to us.

I pray that as we contemplate our commitment to Christ today and consecrate our talents and our resources to Christ's ministry on earth, regardless of whatever amount we put on our pledge cards, we all will pledge in our hearts to invest the talent we have been given which is our lives, to magnifying God's kingdom and the grace and love of God, for there is no better investment on earth. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> Pronounced "kavode."