

Lesson One Use God's Gifts

Parable of the Talents

Matthew 25:14-30

"Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above,
and comes down from the Father of lights,
with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning."

James 1:17

The Blessing of Opportunity

Have you ever considered the number of opportunities that are wasted throughout each day of our lives? The opportunity to say, "Thank you," the opportunity to encourage, the opportunity to lend a helping hand, the opportunity to share the gospel, or the simple opportunity to offer a smile undoubtedly come and go every hour of every day. Chances are that one day we will look back on our lives with far more regret over missed opportunities than any other thing. Like the many other blessings God bestows upon us, our opportunities should be viewed as gifts from God, special moments when God has given us the chance both to grow and affect the lives of others at the same time.

The parable of the talents is one of Jesus' most recognizable parables. Most of us can recite it by heart. According to Matthew, it is also the last parable Jesus told before His crucifixion. For this reason alone, it must have involved an important lesson that Jesus wanted to convey to His disciples.

Though there is little doubt that the subject matter of the parable deals with stewardship, it has most often been used when speaking about one of two blessings: our money and our talents or abilities. Yet this wonderful parable has a much broader application. The talents to which Jesus referred were not monetary units. They were a weight or a unit of measure and could be used to quantify various things of value. For example, a talent of gold would be more valuable than a talent of silver. The talents to which Jesus referred were also not the same as the talents we speak of today, i.e., a special ability that someone has.

Although the parable of the talents is applicable to a study on both using our money and our abilities wisely, it is, in fact, more than that. Its lesson encompasses all the gifts that God has entrusted to us. Perhaps it would be best appreciated and applied if we referred to this parable as the parable of opportunities, looking at each talent as if it were an opportunity. Each of God's gifts to us is exactly that—an opportunity to do His will and glorify His name.

The Lesson

The parable begins with the phrase, "For the kingdom of heaven is like," indicating that the lesson is of direct concern to all of us who are members of that kingdom. Jesus continues by telling the story of an apparently wealthy man who left his home and entrusted his goods to his servants. To one servant, he entrusted five talents, opportunities if you will, to bear fruit. To another he entrusted two and to still another, one. Upon the man's return from his journey, he discovered that the servant to whom he had given five talents had been a good steward, doubling the amount he was given. The servant to whom he had given two talents had done the same. To these two came the words we all

want to someday hear, “Well done, good and faithful servant.” But the servant who had been entrusted with one talent offered his master only excuses. “Lord, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you have not sown, and gathering where you have not scattered seed. And I was afraid, and went and hid your talent in the ground. Look at me, you have what is yours” (vs. 24, 25). In return, the master gave him only punishment, taking away the one talent he had and ordering him thrown into outer darkness.

This parable offers a stark realization of the eternal benefits and consequences of fulfilling our responsibilities as Christian stewards. Whether it’s our talents, our money, our time, our resources, or any opportunity with which we have been entrusted, God expects us to use it to the fullest (1 Corinthians 4:2).

The natural tendency when reading this parable is to look at each of the three servants mentioned and decide the one with which we best identify. Though no one wants to come to the realization that he/she is the one-talent servant, the truth is that each of us has at least a little bit of the one-talent servant in us. None of us is as productive with our opportunities as we would like. Typically, it isn’t because we’re lazy or apathetic. Most of us have a strong desire to become more fruitful in our daily lives. We just haven’t discovered how to do so.

There are many things we can begin to take full advantage of the opportunities God gives us. To become the fruit-bearing stewards that He would have us to be, let’s look at three characteristics of a productive steward.

A productive steward takes a proper inventory of his resources. We can assume that both the five- and two-talent servants in the parable knew the value of what they had been given. They knew what they had to work with and what would be expected of them. In contrast, we often are not fully aware of how much we truly have been blessed. Even though we would

like to be of more service to God's kingdom, we do not really believe that we possess much value. There are two thoughts in dealing with this issue:

- 1) **God is the giver of every gift.** "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning" (James 1:17). God does not create individuals without strengths and resources. Further, He blesses each person with different gifts (Romans 12:6-8), and He blesses each of us in different ways for a reason and that reason is to glorify His name.
- 2) **God keeps on giving.** "And God is able to make all grace abound toward you, that you, always having all sufficiency in all things, may have an abundance for every good work. Now may He who supplies seed to the sower, and bread for food, supply and multiply seed you have sown and increase the fruit of your righteousness," (2 Corinthians 9:8, 10). God does not leave us alone to accomplish those things He wants us to do. In fact, if we ever begin to believe we are capable of pleasing God solely with our own abilities and resources, we are mistaken. We must learn to accept God's resources as He deems them necessary. We will never have enough on our own.

A productive steward focuses more on his own strengths and resources than he does on the strengths and resources of others. All too often, we are less concerned with what we have and more concerned with what we do not have. This was the case with the one-talent servant in the parable of the talents. At least that was the excuse he used. He was ashamed that his gifts were seemingly less valuable than his counterparts. Like the unfaithful servant, our envy of all the blessings we do not possess causes us to belittle those blessings that have been given to us.

One thing is for sure. Each servant in the parable was entrusted with a different number of talents. The one-talent servant was responsible only for the talent he had been given. He was not expected to produce an amount equal to the two-talent servant, and the two-talent servant was not expected to produce an amount equal to the five-talent servant.

Each was given talents equal to his abilities. We are all entrusted with different gifts and varying amounts of resources. The charge is not to equal the outcome of our fellow man or to envy what the other man has, but to make the most of what we have each been given.

A productive steward realizes his work is never finished. One of the most tragic statements that many of us have often uttered is, "It's someone else's turn!" Though it is true that 20 percent of the people do 80 percent of the work, this should never give the 20 percent cause for a day off. Remember, the one-talent servant was only responsible for the talent he had been given, but so was the five-talent servant. After receiving an additional six talents (five of his own and one from the one-talent servant), this servant now had 11 talents. Was he still only responsible for the initial five? It is true that none of us wants to experience spiritual burnout, and we must keep proper balance in our lives. However, it is also true that the more productive stewards we become, the more we will be blessed, and the more we are blessed, the more God expects of us. We must always remain aware that God will continue to give us the strength to do His will (Psalm 9:17) and that He will never allow us to run dry of His resources. "Give and it will be given to you: good measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over will be put into your bosom. For with the same measure that you use, it will be measured back to you" (Luke 6:38).

To summarize:

- 1) Take a daily inventory of your blessings.
- 2) Do not be concerned with the strengths and resources of others, only with your own.
- 3) Believe that as your blessings, strengths, and resources increase, so do your responsibilities. Your work is never finished.

Once we have begun adding these fundamental characteristics to our lives, we only have left to open our eyes and our minds and look around for what we can do at this moment.

Tomorrow is never the answer because today's opportunities will not pass this way again. So, what are your resources? With what opportunities have you been blessed? Our eyes, our ears, our hands, our jobs, our families, our moments spent with a friend, and even our leisure time are all temporary blessings and temporary opportunities. Bless others and glorify our heavenly Father. We should use them now. If not, they will be taken away.

It is no accident that the parable of the talents appears in the book of Matthew in direct succession with the parable of the sheep and the goats. This is the parable that concludes with Jesus' words, "As much as you did it to one of the least of My brethren, you did it to Me." (Matthew 25:40) When we teach a class, send a card, encourage a coworker, or offer a smile or a listening ear to someone in need, we glorify God in a direct, personal way.

Questions

1. Read Romans 12:6-8. Make a list of the unique skills, abilities, and resources you have been given.
2. How have you used or failed to use those skills and resources to glorify God?
3. Other than what you have been given, what are some of the most precious gifts God has given you?
4. How have you used or failed to use every opportunity to glorify God with the blessings listed above?
5. Read the parable of the poor widow found in Luke 21:1-4. Concerning our opportunities and resources, how are we sometimes guilty of giving only from our abundance?
6. Read Luke 10:13-14. What does Jesus' condemnation of the cities of Chorazin and Bethsaida say about our responsibility to bear fruit according to our blessings?
7. Read 1 Corinthians 3:8. What are some of the rewards you have received already for the opportunities you have seized in your life? With which of the three servants listed in the parable of the talents do you best identify and why?