

August 18/19, 2007

What Are You Doing With What You've Been Given?

Matthew 25:14-30

Pastor Bryan Clark

There are so many simple ways everyday to make a difference in somebody's life. It's really the difference between just putting in my time and investing my time. That's what we want to talk about today. Two weeks ago we reminded ourselves that every one of us is fearfully and wonderfully made by God on purpose for a purpose, all the way down to the reality that God has ordained the number of days we would live. You want to shrink it down? God has ordained every minute of our lives, and if that is true, then every minute matters to God.

Now there are those that believe we are simply here as products of chance through a series of mutations over billions of years. And perhaps one reason people like that theory is because it offers no accountability. It in essence says I'm free to live my life as I please and at the end of my day nobody holds me accountable for what I did with my life.

But of course when you hear the words, "We were made on purpose for a purpose," immediately you hear it, don't you? Accountability – that we are going to be held accountable for what we have done with what we've been given. We like to remind ourselves that every single person has a high and holy calling. But you cannot say that and in the next breath say, "But that calling doesn't really matter." If it is indeed a high and holy calling, it comes with a level of accountability—"What have you done with what you've been given?"

If you have a Bible this morning, turn with us to Matthew chapter 25. It's a section of the Gospel of Matthew where Jesus is delivering a rather lengthy sermon, at least by biblical standards, on the Mount of Olives. So it's often called the Olivet Discourse.

A lot of the discussion is about end-times theology – the return of Christ. And as you're probably aware, there is a lot of difference of opinion on how things are going to work in the end. And we would say that it's arrogant for anybody to think that he or she has it figured out. The Bible just isn't that clear. But every single commentator that I read agreed that the primary focus is on the return of Christ. And we all agree Christ is coming back. Second of all, every single one of them agreed that this parable has relevance to us as to how we steward or manage what we've been given from God. So with that in mind, I want us to look at this parable of the talents.

Beginning in verse 14:

“For it is just like a man about to go on a journey, who called his own slaves and entrusted his possessions to them. To one he gave five talents, to another, two, and to another, one, each according to his own ability; and he went on his journey. (Matthew 25:14-15; *NASB)

Let's just go that far to start with. In the ancient world, slavery was very different than what we may think of based on the experience here in America. In the ancient world, a lot of slaves were actually what we would call white-collar professionals. They were entrusted with a significant amount of responsibility. So it's important to realize as Jesus was telling this story, it would ring true because this was often done – that a wealthy land owner would leave the slaves in charge of a significant amount of wealth.

A “talent” here is not what we think of as a talent. A talent was actually a currency. It’s a form of money – a significant amount of money. It was basically a brick, kind of like a brick of silver that weighed between 60 and 80 pounds. It also was of extreme value. If you have an NIV translation, you might find in the footnote it says it was worth about a thousand dollars. Interesting – every single commentary that I read said that they have no idea where the NIV came up with that because it is grossly inaccurate. It is way low. As a matter of fact, a talent would have been worth about the average person’s salary over a period of 20 years. So if you imagine being the average worker working for twenty years and not spending one penny of what you earned, over those 20 years you would earn the equivalent of one talent – somewhere in the neighborhood between \$200,000 and \$250,000 in our economy. So basically, the landowner is distributing about \$2,000,000, so it is a significant amount of money.

We notice that the talents are not distributed equally. One receives five, one receives two, and one receives one. But the statement that’s so interesting is **“each according to his own ability.”** In other words, “his own ability to manage or steward what he had been given.” We’ll come back and talk about that more in just a little bit.

Verse 16:

“Immediately the one who had received the five talents went and traded with them, and gained five more talents. In the same manner the one who had received the two talents gained two more. But he who received the one talent went away, and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money.” (vs. 16-18)

As soon as the master leaves, the first slave takes the five talents that he has received and he basically works it into a business and doubles it. When it says here that he “traded,” we tend to think in our economy that he invested the money and this is the return on the investment. But that type of investment as we understand it today simply wasn’t a part of the ancient economy. The Greek word basically means he traded, as in put it into business, and in that business, then, was able to double the amount. The slave with two talents did the same thing.

It’s also important to realize that the idea of doubling the amount would have been considered average in the ancient world. This isn’t something where the listeners would have heard, “This is extraordinary.” They would have heard, “This is average.” As a matter of fact, there are other parables that Jesus tells where He talks about somebody increasing the amount by five times and even by ten times. So this would have been considered just an average return – you know a nice job.

The third slave, with one talent, simply buries it in the ground. Now in the ancient world, they did not have banks as we think about them today. And one of the challenges if you were wealthy was what do you do with your wealth so that no one steals it? Many people actually put it into clothing. They would basically wear their retirement account because it was the only way they could keep someone else from stealing their wealth. Another option was to find a lonely place somewhere and simply bury it in the ground and hope nobody finds it. And that’s what the slave does here.

“Now after a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. The one who had received the five talents came up and brought five more talents, saying, 'Master, you entrusted five talents to me. See, I have gained five more talents.' His master said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful slave. You were faithful with a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.' Also the one who had received the two talents came up and said, 'Master,

you entrusted two talents to me. See, I have gained two more talents.' His master said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful slave. You were faithful with a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.'" (vs. 19-23)

It says, **"After a long time the master of those slaves came..."** So this isn't kind of an overnight success, but rather they've just been steadily working the business. And when the master comes back, clearly there is a level of accountability. "What have you done with what you've been given?" The first slave comes back, and he reports that he took the five talents and he increased them to ten talents. And he receives the wonderful words, "Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful with few, so I will give you much. Enter into the joy of the master."

The second slave comes back who had received two talents and he two had doubled his. It's important to notice that the response of the master was exactly the same. He was not responsible for making the same amount of money as the one with five. He was just held accountable for he did with what he was given? And when he came back having also doubled it, the master said the exact same thing. "Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful with a few, so I will entrust you with much. Enter into the joy of the master."

"And the one also who had received the one talent came up and said, 'Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow and gathering where you scattered no seed. And I was afraid, and went away and hid your talent in the ground. See, you have what is yours.'" (vs. 24-25)

When the master comes back, the third slave who had received one talent—and again, let's remind ourselves this isn't pocket change. This is of extreme value. This is twenty years worth of labor to accumulate this amount of money. So in the mind of the master, this is still very important—appears to have a bit of an attitude. And perhaps the attitude started when he saw that the first slave got five, the second slave got two, and he only got one. So right from the beginning he's a little bent out of shape.

But he also identifies that he thinks the master is hard, or harsh. The master is unfair and he defines why he thinks that, "Because you are going to reap what you did not sow, and you're going to gather what you did not scatter." In other words, what he's saying is this: "Hey, while you're gone doing who knows what, we're going to be the ones here doing the work. We're going to be the ones taking the risk. We're going to be the ones doing the labor. And when you come back, you're going to take all the profit." And he doesn't like that, so he's determined not to profit for the master. Perhaps he's thinking, *You know, what's the point? If I work the money and lose it, I'm only going to experience the master's wrath. And if I work really hard and make a large profit, he's just going to take the profit. So what's the point?* So he decides, *I'm just going to bury it in the ground.* He even identifies, "I was afraid. I thought the best thing to do was put it in the ground. When you come back, I'll give you what's yours and we're even."

Well, the master didn't quite see it that way.

"But his master answered and said to him, 'You wicked, lazy slave, you knew that I reap where I did not sow and gather where I scattered no seed. Then you ought to have put my money in the bank, and on my arrival I would have received my money back with interest. Therefore take away the talent from him, and give it to the one who has the ten talents.'" (vs. 26-28)

Interesting, the master comes back and says, “You wicked and lazy slave.” This word “lazy” is a really interesting Greek word. It could be translated “lazy” or it could be translated “fearful”. And I think it’s interesting that this same word carries the idea both of “lazy” and “afraid”. The slave himself identified that he was a fearful person. When you think about it, what is it that makes us lazy? And maybe when you cut through it, deep in our heart there is fear, and the fear is, *I’m going to fail*. The fear is, *I’m going to mess up*. And so we think it’s easier really not to try at all than to risk failure. Therefore that fear translates into what we would call lazy. Well that’s basically what the master says.

Now, the translation here is a little bit confusing. I don’t think the NASB does a very good job with it because the master is not affirming that he really is as the slave has said he is. As a matter of fact, we know from the first two slaves that he’s actually very benevolent. He’s actually very generous. The first two slaves knew that. They loved him, they worked for him, and they shared in the reward.

What he is saying is a little bit sarcastic. He is saying, “You know, even if you thought that, then at the very least you should have put the money to work if for no other reason than you were afraid of me and should have done something with it.” He says, “You should have put it in the bank,” and you’re thinking, *You know, I thought you said just a minute ago there were no banks*. Well, that is true. This is a Greek word that basically means a money exchanger. Probably the safest thing you could do with your money if you’re going to make a little bit more money in the ancient world is as people came from out of the country into Jerusalem, they had to exchange their currency in order to trade just like we do today. So if you had that capital where you could exchange their money for them, you would add a little bit of interest and you could make some money doing that. But it was virtually 100% safe. There really was no risk and you could slowly increase the amount of money you had, and so that’s what the master is referring to. That is a no-risk, kind of a no-brainer way to have at least done something with the money.

And then Jesus summarizes:

“For to everyone who has, more shall be given, and he will have an abundance; but from the one who does not have, even what he does have shall be taken away. Throw out the worthless slave into the outer darkness; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” (vs. 29-30)

Now again, this paragraph is a little bit hard to understand. And again I don’t think the NASB does a real good job with it. The grammar basically would say it like this: “For to everyone who has been faithful [the “been faithful” is implied] more will be given. To everyone who has not been faithful, what you have will be taken away.”

So that’s the parable; that’s the story. The question is what does this have to do with us? What do we learn from this? So let’s go back and walk through it a little bit trying to answer that question.

First of all, clearly the master is Jesus. If you read through the Olivet Discourse, the emphasis is on the fact that Jesus is coming back. So He’s the master, and when He comes back He’s going to hold people accountable.

The talent is not limited to money. Money is just making the point in the story. A talent could be anything that you’ve been given that you are required to steward for God’s purposes. It’s your time; it’s your abilities; it’s your talent as we think of it; it’s your advantages; it’s everything about your life that you are to manage for God’s purposes.

Now the first thing we notice is that God does not distribute equally – some five, some two, some one. So there's no point comparing ourselves with one another. Your calling is not to be me. My calling is not to be you. So there's no point in those comparisons. God's not asking you to be someone else. He's just asking you to wisely steward what you have been given.

Second of all, each one is given according to his or her ability to wisely manage or steward it. Now when you think about it, that's quite a remarkable thought. Maybe in your mind, you have only received one talent. You look at your past; you look at your history; you look at your life; and maybe you're often thinking you've been dealt a bad hand, and it all isn't fair.

God isn't asking you to be somebody else. God's just asking you to steward what you have been given. The tendency, if you think you've somehow got a bad deal, is to think, *Why try at all?* And it's easy to just roll over and give up thinking at the end of the day you'll say, *You know, it's not my fault.* But what's clearly stated in this parable is that God has given every single person in this room the ability to wisely manage what you have been given. This means that at the end of the day the possibility of you hearing these words, "Well done good and faithful servant. You have been faithful with few, I'm going to put you in charge of much. Enter into the joy of the master," is just as possible as any other person in this room. The possibility of you being faithful with what you've been given and hearing those wonderful words from the Master is equal to everyone else, because God Himself says, "I have given you the ability to manage what I've given you." Now that fills all of us with hope, realizing that's true.

We get into the discussion about the slave with five and the slave with two, and one of the things that captures my attention is that statement, **"You were faithful with a few things, I will put you in charge of many..."** Now we know that the master is Jesus. And we know when the master comes back it's referring to the return of Jesus. So we know that "the few" is a reference to what happens before Jesus returns – meaning now – and "the much" is a reference to something after the return of Jesus which is in the life to come. So the question would be, what does He mean when He says, "You've been faithful with few, I'm going to put you in charge of much." What is "the much" in the life to come? And my highly informed answer would be, "I just don't know."

This is one of those topics I just am not satisfied that I understand. I've read a number of different positions, and I can't find anyone that, in my opinion, really understands it biblically. The one thing I do know is that the New Testament is clear that how we live out our Christian faith in this life does have a dramatic effect on what we experience for eternity. Now I don't know exactly what that means or what that will look like. But I think if we get in the mindset that as long as I have my ticket to heaven, that I can live like the devil and because of grace it will make no difference for eternity, I would suggest to you that you have made a monumental error in your thinking. I can't explain exactly what the rewards thing is all about but I will tell you this: There is a correlation between how you choose to manage or steward what you've been given in this life and what you will experience with God for eternity. And that's a rather sobering thought.

When we get to the third slave, it's a little harder to process. I think in the big picture we have to understand that stewardship is not limited to just those of us who have trusted Christ as Savior. It is a responsibility of every person. Every person is made in the image of God. Every person has been given life. Every person has been given talents, and gifts, and abilities, and opportunities. People can choose to use those totally for selfish purposes. But they're still gifts from God. And they will be held accountable for what they have done with those gifts. One of the silliest statements in our culture today is that anyone is a self-made man or a self-made woman. The most successful person

on the face of the planet is about 98% a gift from God, and maybe they've worked about 2% of that. The very fact that that person draws breath today is a gift from God.

So I think in the big picture what's being said is that person who's been made in the image of God with the ability to choose God, with the ability to know God, with the ability to receive His salvation – if that person chooses simply to bury all that in the ground and have no real relationship with God and to not receive His salvation, he loses it all and is cast away from God at the end of the day. Jesus Himself said, “What does it profit a man if he gains the whole world, but loses his soul?” I think that's, in the big picture, what's being referred to there.

But I think there's also application to us. It's really interesting to think through the attitude of this slave. First of all, I think he was a little disjointed because he only got one talent and the others got two and five. So already he's in a bad frame of mind. But I think he's really upset about the fact that the master is saying, “I want you to do all the work, and I'm going to take all the profit.” And he is simply saying, “I don't think I want to work under that arrangement.”

Now stop and think about this. When we steward what we've been given for God's purposes, we understand that means this is for God's glory. The alternative is the value system of this world that says, “Why don't you use what you've been given for your own purposes, to build up your own self esteem, to make yourself look like somebody.” And so we tend to be tempted to go down that path, because we understand that this world applauds much more loudly than God.

So if we take what we've been given – whatever that is, your time, your talent, your treasures – and we invest it into the value system of this world, the world applauds. The world says, “You're somebody. You're special. You're important. You're valuable.” And there's something very appealing to our flesh about that. And so the temptation is to use what we've been given for our own purposes, because the world says we're somebody. But you need to know something. If that's how you choose to steward what you've been given, you had better enjoy that applause a lot, because it is short-lived. Then it is gone forever. If you choose to buy into that value system, you have paid an unimaginable price tag for the applause of this world.

The alternative is to realize, *When I do this for God's glory, I'm not going to hear a lot of applause from the world. They're not impressed. And at this time in my life, it seems like the world applauds much louder than God. And I have to accept that because I'm investing myself into God's purposes. But I also understand God is allowing me to invest myself into something that will still matter a thousand years from now, and when Jesus comes back and says, “Well done good and faithful servant,” I will share in His reward forever.* So what God is saying is, “Wouldn't you rather enter into My joy forever than to enjoy the applause of this world for a moment?” That's the challenge here when we think about how do we manage or steward what we've been given.

I think there are many good Christians out in the marketplace, in the educational system, wherever, who day in and day out, they're very good people. They're very honest; they're people of integrity; they're very nice; they're very kind; they're very loving; and they pretty much have concluded in their mind, *As long as I'm good, then I pretty much can just embrace the value system of this world and do my best, and at the end that's all that matters.* That would be, in my opinion, what I would call defense. But it's important to understand if we don't have a sense of offense, then we have not been a good steward.

Let's imagine that I'm a soldier and I get called to Baghdad, and I ask, “What's the mission?” They say, “Well the mission is to not get killed.” Well that's defensive. If that's the only mission then,

hey, how about we just stay home? There's got to be more of a mission than that. There has to be offense. We have to understand we're there to accomplish something and in the process we don't want to get killed. Otherwise, what's the point?

Do you understand that you could be very good, very moral, very nice, very kind, be squeaky clean in how you run your business, and at the end of the day, in God's opinion, you've just buried your talent? The reality is if we do not see it with a sense of offense – not to be *offensive* – but a sense of offense that every single thing you've been given is to be stewarded or managed for God's eternal purposes, it's not enough just to live out your life as a good person. There has to be more of a sense of purpose than that.

Now at this point, you may be saying, “You know, that's just a fine little speech, Bryan, but what does that mean? Do all of us have to quit our jobs and become pastors or missionaries?” And the answer is no. That would be a disaster. There may be a handful of you called to vocational ministry. Most of you are called somewhere else. You're called to the world of medicine; you're called to the marketplace; you're called to education; you're called to be a homemaker. What you have to do is begin to think more strategically, *God has given me these talents; God has given me these opportunities; God has placed me in these arenas. I have this platform; I have this personality. How can I use what God has given me for His purposes? How can I be more than just defensive? How can I take the offense and begin to think about how I can use or manage what God has given me in order to accomplish that which lasts forever in people's lives?* We need to begin to think about every single opportunity, talent, gift, ability, role, arena, and how God might want to use me today.

Our tendency when we have these talks is to say, “You know, I really need to think about that and maybe when I get a different job, maybe when I get out of college, maybe when I get out of school, maybe when I grow up, maybe when I get married, maybe...” and on and on we go. But you don't know that you have any of that. The only thing you know that you have is today. So the question is: What are you going to do with what you've been given today? This day, this hour, this minute, because this minute matters to God.

Now I think everybody has a general call, and everyone has a specific call. A general call is what we've been talking about. It's just thinking through all of the opportunities, the platforms, the arenas, the roles, my life such as it is today, and how can God use that to touch somebody else's life for eternity. But I think we all have a specific call as well. What specifically has God called me to to be part of the body of Christ that I can be a part of accomplishing the mission that God has given?

And that's really what this *Service Expo* is all about. It is an opportunity for you to become aware of hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of ways that you can serve in a role that fits who you are, that fits where you're at spiritually, that fits your time, that fits your schedule. It's an opportunity to be more efficient in surveying what the opportunities are, and I would encourage you to take advantage of this week and next week to do that.

Now some of the ministries, the service opportunities, are things that happen here on this campus. But you also have to understand that some of those will be things that will happen off this campus. There's a lot of ministry that isn't limited to what happens in this location. And God may call you to that in a very specific way. There are also organizations represented that aren't under the umbrella of Lincoln Berean Church. We just embrace them as partners in accomplishing the mission. We're not possessive about that. If God calls you to serve in a ministry that isn't a ministry of Lincoln Berean Church, all we believe that God wants is that you're investing your life into that which lasts forever.

I heard someone once say, “Yesterday’s a cancelled check. Tomorrow’s a promissory note. Today is the only cash you have, so spend it wisely.” All you know is that you have today. You say, “Well I still don’t understand what this means. Does this mean I should be witnessing to people 24 hours a day? And if I spend one moment doing nothing at home that somehow God is displeased with that?” That’s not what I’m saying. I think leisure is very important. I think that’s part of good stewardship. I remember growing up I used to hear these preachers say that they would rather burn out than rust out for God. And I remember thinking to myself, *Are those really the only two options?* Please understand burning out for God does not impress Him. As a matter of fact, it’s very poor stewardship. Good stewardship is understanding there is a place for leisure. I’m all about hobbies. I think they make me better at what I do. Good stewardship is finding a place that you can live with for the next twenty years. I tell our staff, “Find a pace of ministry where you find yourself saying, ‘I can keep this pace the next twenty years,’ and you’ve probably found a good, healthy pace of life.”

Stewardship simply means understanding that everything I’ve been given I am expected to manage for God’s purposes. And God has given me the ability to manage whatever He’s given me, that someday when I stand before Him I will hear those words, “Well done good and faithful servant. You have been faithful with few, so I’m going to put you in charge of much. Enter into the joy of your Master.”

Our Father, we are thankful that You are such a benevolent God, so good and so generous. Lord, we serve You because we love You. We serve You because we want to enter into that reward which will last forever. Lord, we understand this morning that some here have received five talents, some two, and some one. Lord, it’s not about comparing. This isn’t a competition. For every single one of us, it’s simply about being faithful with what we’ve been given. Lord, I pray for each one of us that You would help us to better understand what it means to be a wise steward, that we would one day hear those words, “Well done good and faithful servant.” Lord, help us to understand that every day, every hour, every minute matters to You. And Lord, if that’s true, then it needs to matter to us. This we pray in Jesus’ name, Amen.