

Parable of the Responsibilities

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Years ago I saw a talent show on television; I remember a man who with his eyes closed, could hear from the sound of a car's door being shut, what type of car it was.

Usually talents shows are not about the doors of cars; it is about people who sing, dance, act, they play an instrument.

I am sure that even among us here, we have many unique talents. Take our pianist. He has talents that I could only dream of.



Jesus told a parable about talents; we have just read it. The word talent as we use it in our West-European languages comes directly from this parable that Jesus told.

Through the Vulgate, the Latin Bible translation that was used all over Europe, the word talent entered into our languages. And the popular meaning of the word talent, in the Middle Ages, became: your natural ability or your skill. Something that you are really good at.

But the popularity of the word and what it began to mean, has made it harder for us to understand what Jesus is speaking about in this parable, because we have taken this modern meaning of talent, and we read that back into the story.

“You want to be a good Christian? You have to use your talents....”

But that is not exactly what Jesus is saying.

1. Responsibility

The parable that we read, begins with the words “it is as if a man, going on a journey”. What do those words “it is” refer to? For that we have to look at the previous passage.

In Matthew 24, Jesus spoke of His return in the end of the age. “But concerning that day and hour no one knows... The master of the servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he does not know....”

In Matthew 25, Jesus continues: "Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour."

Then Jesus continues with the parable we have read.

He is explaining that we must be prepared for his second coming. And of course it is also about how we have to prepare for meeting with Him when we pass away.

How do you and I have to prepare for our personal Day of Accountability. That is important.

Our Lord tells the story of a business man who left his business for a long time, but before he left he made three managers responsible for the business, or for part of his business.

The concept of an absentee businessman was common in Israel at that time. And what he did was normal. He delegated his business to his servants. Those were really his top management.

And the owner of the business was wise, he knew that not all his managers had similar business skills, so he gave each one a different responsibility. 'To each according to his ability.' In accordance with their business talents, he gave them responsibilities.

Based on their business acumen, he gave them an amount of money. A talent was originally a measure of weight - about 58 kilos. It came to mean a sum of money.

A talent of coins, 58 kilos of coins, came to be a standard for expressing your wealth.

So a talent, in those days, was a large sum of money.

We do not know whether the parable is about a talent of copper coins, silver, or gold. Even if it was just copper, 58 kilos of it was the equivalent of about a year of work for a day labourer. A great amount.

The first servant gets 5 talents to work with, another gets 2 talents, and the third one gets 1 talent. You know the story.

In the end, the owner comes back, and he holds the three managers accountable. That is the first thing Jesus is telling us with this parable. All people will be held accountable for what they have done.

We all have our talents, our abilities, but that is not what God looks at. He looks at how you handle the responsibilities God has given you. What you do with your life for serving him.

So instead of calling this the parable of the talents, I think it is really a parable of responsibilities. Based on their abilities, call it talents if you like, the business owner gave his managers responsibilities.



These responsibilities were based on their abilities, their talents, but the parable is about what God asks us to do, and that does not have to be related to what you are naturally good at.

One simple example. I am not naturally good at helping old ladies cross the road. But if someone is almost being run over by a truck, and I can help that old lady to cross the road safely, should I say 'no, that is not my talent. That is not what I am naturally good at.'

I have been in a church in the past where it was really hard to get people for certain ministries in the church, because many people were infected with this idea that you must only do what you are good at. And that God only asks of you those things where you have your natural talents.

Our parable does not focus on what we are naturally good at, but at how we act in regard to what God asks us to do. How we obey him.

And surely, God gives more responsibilities to certain people than to others. But the lesson of the parable is: If God puts tasks, responsibilities in front of you, then do it.

2. Accountability

Do the things God asks you to do, because there will be a day when all of us will be held accountable.

When the business owner comes back, the books will be opened. He will ask us - how have you preformed the tasks I gave you.

And what is the heart of what God asks of us? To love Him and to love others.

That is the issue. Have you done that, as good as you could?

The first two managers came to the business owner with joy.

The master had been gone long, and maybe they sometimes wondered will he ever come back? But they kept working for the man, and they earned him a lot of money.

Both of them doubled what he had given them. That was really a lot. Inflation in those days hardly existed, so to double an amount meant a lot of profit.

When Jesus tells the story, he lets the owner of the business praise these two co-workers with exactly the same words:

His master said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master.'



The man who earned 2 talents was praised with the exact same words as the man who had earned 5 talents. This is important: The praise is not based on the actual profit they made for the owner, but on their good and faithful work.

What was important was not the total amount earned, but faithfulness in utilising their gifts and potential for the sake of their Lord.

God does not look at how much you earned Him, He does not look at how much the impact was of your service. He does not look at how much you give to church financially. Or how many children you saved from hunger.

God does not compare you with some other Christians who 'do more'. God looks at you, and your own abilities, and responsibilities, and whether you did what you could. Whether you expressed your love for him and for others as good and faithful as you could.

And for every follower of Jesus Christ who does what he or she can to serve God, His praise is similar. Well done. Enter into the joy...

The master in the story said: 'you have been faithful over a little.' Well, it was not that little, was it? But for God, the Creator, what we do is minute. His Kingdom will come, His will shall be done, and that does not depend on us.

But what is important is our faithfulness. That for the love for Him, we do what we can in our church, in our work, in our world.

In this regard, I noticed in the story a few small but important words that defined those two good servants. The two good servants went 'at once' and traded. At once.

One of the greatest enemies of serving God, is procrastination. Do not postpone what needs to be done. Do it now.

The two good servants began their work immediately. Why?

Well, the boss had told them, so they did. Our Lord is to be obeyed.

And if someone trusts you to do a job, then this is really an encouragement to get started. Our Lord trust us to work for him, imagine.

But also, they knew there would be a day of reckoning. They would, one day, have to show what they did. And when our Lord comes, we love to show him what we did.

3. What went wrong with servant 3?

The real warning for us in the parable is of course that we must not be like that third man.

He dug a hole for safekeeping his master's money but he was in a way digging it for himself.

He did nothing with the money. He felt that he had done enough. When he gave the money back, he said that this was exactly what he owed the owner of the business.

But the owner said: you owe me more. You should have at least put it in the bank and get me some interest.

Do you remember, long ago? Interest meant that the bank paid you 1, 2 or 3 percent. The good old days.

So the owner tells the man that he was wicked and slothful. Lazy.

Sloth is one of the cardinal sins. You have abilities, you have responsibilities, but you do nothing. You just sit. And wait. Enjoy life, but not work for God.

I can imagine enough reasons why you would not use you opportunities for serving God.

Laziness may be an aspect. There are people who just love to do nothing. But in that case you probably would not have left your house on Sunday morning to come to church.

There are people who see others who have more, who have more abilities maybe, and it makes them angry. Jealous.

Or timid and feeling inferior, when you compare yourself with others. 'I am good for nothing.' That feeling of being nothing is hurting yourself and often makes people lethargic.

Maybe, like the man in the story, you are really afraid of God, and you think you may never be good enough. Afraid to make mistakes maybe.

And there are Christians who just forget about the fact that there will be a last day when the books will be opened.

Conclusion

And if you have all those feelings, and your are worried and you do not know how to serve God? I like what Jesus told that third man: you should have gone to the bankers. They could have helped you.

If you do not know how to serve God, then ask other people to help you serve God. Do not postpone. Talk with others. Tell them what you can do, what your abilities are. What you dream of. And ask them for advise.

But do not postpone. Act. That is the message of Jesus. Sloth can have no place in our life.

As disciples of our Lord, we look at ourselves, we see what we are able to do, we look at the need around us, and we act, we act. As good and faithful servants, because we love God and other people.

Amen.