



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermons

Returning to the Talents

Matthew 25.14–30

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Introduction

It's a rhyme with an interesting history. It apparently originated in the context of military preparedness in 14th century England and came to be used to encourage children to tend to the details and leave nothing to chance. The earliest known written version of it is from around 1390. Benjamin Franklin included a version in his *Poor Richard's Almanac* when America and England were on opposite sides. During World War II, it was framed and hung on the wall of the Anglo-American Supply Headquarters in London (Nail Rhyme 2017). Probably most of us have heard it:

For want of a nail the shoe was lost.
For want of a shoe the horse was lost.
For want of a horse the rider was lost.
For want of a rider the battle was lost.
For want of a battle the kingdom was lost.
And all for the want of a horseshoe nail.

The verse is a good reminder of the importance of details and the significance of seemingly little things for the largest of concerns. It harmonizes with the New Testament's emphasis on being faithful in little things (cf. Luke 16.10) and the importance of the seemingly insignificant parts of the body (1 Cor 12.12–30). In a different way, our text, the parable of the talents, reinforces its point.

Setting and Theme

Because we are so familiar with Jesus's story about the talents, we may skip its context and miss out on the blessings of more serious reflection on his point. Discussion of the theme it addresses begins with his teaching in Matthew 24.36–51. Some of the disciples had asked about the coming age of the Messiah (24.3). Jesus answered their question before telling them more about his future coming. Verses 36–44 state and illustrate his point: no one knows when he will come and so everyone should always be prepared. Verses 45–51 begin to illustrate the point with the

first of three parables. In those verses, Jesus envisions alternate hypothetical situations involving the same servant: if he is faithful when his master comes, he will be prepared and thus will be blessed and rewarded (vv. 45–47); if he is wicked, he will be punished (vv. 48–51).

This parable introduces three important ideas. First, God rewards and punishes people based on their faithfulness in completing assigned tasks. Second, faithfulness requires perseverance, realizing that the end can come at any time. Third, those who postpone taking care of their responsibilities and act irresponsibly wicked may discover it is too late to change and make amends (Blomberg 1992, 369).

The ideal servant in verses 45–51 is to be “faithful and wise” (v. 45), an expectation that is elaborated in the two parables that follow. The parable of the ten bridesmaids illustrates wisdom (Matt 25.1–13). The parable of the talents illustrates faithfulness (Matt 25.14–30).

The Story: When Talents Are Used

Most of us are familiar with Jesus’s story. As he prepared to leave for a trip, a master entrusted his property to three servants, the allotments based on their respective abilities (Matt 25.14–15). The first two used their talents, doubled the original investments, and were commended (25.16–23). In fear of the master, the third buried his, was reprimanded for his inaction, lost his talent, and suffered the fate of the wicked servant described in Matthew 24.51 (25.24–30).

Like the other parables in the section, this one reminds us of more than one idea. To take the case of the wicked servant first, the gifts and talents the Master gives are to be used or we will be separated from God and all things good. The other two servants show that the gifts and talents given to us are to be used and that when they are used faithfully, blessings and commendation await. But don’t miss some additional ideas about faithfulness. All were given some talent; there were no no-talent servants. But they were not all given the same talents or the same allotment of talents. The reality is that the abilities of people differ, and some do have more ability than others. Each is judged according to what he or she has.

A Church Using Its Talents

Before I turn to the specific application of Jesus’s parable I want to make, think for a moment about the church at Philippi, a church whose members that used their talents.

As we see in Philippians 1, Philippi was a good church, relatively trouble-free when compared to other churches with moral and doctrinal issues (e.g., Corinth, the Galatian churches, Colossae). But it was not a perfect church, as we see in his discussion of their tensions in 2.1–18 and 4.2–3.

But Paul was able to say that God was doing a good work in them (Phil 1.6) and commended them for sharing with Paul in grace, support, and the defense and confirmation of the gospel (v. 7). They were a church in which there was love and the hope of a future (vv. 9–10) that had produced a “harvest of righteousness” (v. 11 NRSV). In addition, they were praying for Paul (v. 19), adding to his confidence that Christ would always be exalted in his body (v. 20).

He was also able to point to several specific good things they had been doing over time. They had a history of showing concern for Paul by their provision of assistance to him in his work; when that good work had been hindered, it was because of circumstances, not intent (4.10).

From their beginning, he said, they had supported him through his most trying times (4.15–16; cf. Acts 16–17). As he had already mentioned in chapter 1, their concern and support had extended to his imprisonment; they had sent Epaphroditus, one of their own, with gifts to sustain Paul, a mission that had nearly cost the man his life (4.18; cf. 1.7, 12–13; 2.25–30).

Here's the point I want to stress Philippi's example: Paul did not single out any of them as a five-talent disciple, but rather commended all of them for faithfully using the talents they had.

In light of that, here is my specific application. Having observed, and at times led, successful events such as a Vacation Bible School, Friends Day, etc., I have noticed that every time such events were successful, it was because a variety of people with different kinds and levels of talents faithfully used the abilities they had for the good and glory of the Lord's work. Whenever you use your talent[s] that way, you should see it as "a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God" (Phil 4.18). You should also remember that the Lord will say about your good work, "Well done, good and faithful servant.... [This good work will count as you move toward] enter[ing] the joy of our master" (adapting Matt 25.21, 23).

Conclusion

A little boy tried out for his school play and had his heart set on getting a part. His mother, fearful he might not be chosen and anxious about what that would do to him, nervously drove to school to pick him up on the day the cast list was posted. Her son rushed out, eyes shining with pride and excitement. He exclaimed, "Mom, I was chosen to clap and cheer!" (adapted from Green 1989, 352).

Not everyone gets to be the star of the play. But, without those who "clap and cheer," even the greatest of stars usually do not shine very brightly. Whether a five-talent "star," or a one-talent "extra" who "claps and cheers," know that God is always pleased when you serve him faithfully. Keep serving, and look forward to hearing him say, "Well done!"

Works Cited

- Craig L. Blomberg. 1992. *Matthew*. The New American Commentary. Vol. 22. ed. David S. Dockery. Nashville, TN: Broadman Press.
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