

Rarely on a Sunday morning do I talk about what goes on behind the scenes here at Fellowship but I have become aware of a situation I'm not sure how to respond to. Maybe you can help me. I received a report that one of our SS teachers wanted to raise money for a ministry that provides goats for hungry kids in Africa. The teacher brought in a sack of potatoes and told the kids they could take as many as they wanted if they would use them to raise money to donate to the goat project. Most of the kids just took one potato and were a little unsure what to do with it but one little boy took two potatoes and with the help of some remnants of a Mr. Potato Head game, dressed up the potatoes like grandma and grandpa and sold them to the grandparents for \$10. An enterprising little girl took five potatoes and, with her mom's help, cooked them, put them in foil with some toppings, and sent them to work with dad so he could sell them to coworkers for lunch. She brought back \$15 to donate to the project. Here is where the story gets weird.

One little boy came back to class and hadn't done anything with his potato. He wasn't sure what to do so he took the potato home, washed it, wrapped it, and took good care of it so he could return it unharmed to the teacher. When the teacher saw it, she was furious. She said, "You wicked, lazy little boy. I told you to do use this potato to make money for the class project. You did nothing. You are no longer welcome in my class." How would you respond to that teacher? You may say, "That didn't really happen. You made that story up." Well yes and no. I simply paraphrased the Parable of the Talents. Jesus spoke forcefully about the importance of doing everything in our power to expand the kingdom of God. **Those who serve the King take risks to grow the kingdom. What you have will never grow until you risk and let it go!**

In our study of the parables of the kingdom we have discovered that in just about every story we are caught by surprise. Last week the workers were paid the same regardless of the hours worked. In the dragnet story people will be separated at the end of the age which is counter cultural in today's egalitarian, all-inclusive, pluralistic, relativistic society. Jesus surprises us with the capacity of a mustard seed and the response of a man who finds a buried treasure or a pearl. The kingdom of God is not like the kingdom of this world. However in today's parable we find one area where the kingdom of God is not so different from the kingdom of this world. We learn that what gets rewarded is not our careful frugality but our aggressive profitability. Stewardship is defined by Jesus as a willingness to risk, to give away what we have been given in hopes of having more. The Christian life is a call to risk. What you have will never grow until you risk and let it go. Let's take a closer look at the parable of the talents.

Matthew 25 begins with another parable of the kingdom, the parable of the ten virgins. Verse 14 is a continuation of the description Jesus is giving of the kingdom. Consider the main features:

I. The King entrusts His servants with valuable resources. (vv. 14-15) A talent is a unit of money not a skill. Jesus uses money because money = value. God has entrusted us with more than money. We possess skills, abilities, influence, children, businesses, just to mention a few things. We all own "stuff." We are surrounded by stuff. We have more stuff than we know what to do with. The longer you live the more stuff we accumulate. You get married and you combine your stuff with her stuff. Then you have kids and you really start to get "stuffed."

Eventually you give your stuff to your kids who add your stuff to their stuff and when they die they leave their stuff to their kids who can't get rid of it because it's good stuff, old stuff, nostalgic stuff. The truth is we Americans are all stuffed! This parable is about what we do with all of our stuff.

Notice that each servant receives a different amount. God sovereignly determines who gets what. The New Century Version says he gave "to each as much as he could handle." God gives to each of us as much as we can handle; as much money, skill, intelligence, etc.

II. The King expects us to grow the kingdom with what He gives us. (vv. 16-18) It is the nature of the kingdom to grow. Growth is not an option. The harsh tone of this parable is intentional on Jesus' part. He tells us it is a sin to hoard His blessings. We are to circulate the resources He gives us because it is unloving for us to pursue our own comfort when something great may be achieved for the cause of Christ and for the good of others by letting go of what we have in order to gain more. What we have will never grow until we risk and let it go. Citizens of this kingdom get that.

Todd Wagner partnered with Mark Cuban to make a multi-billion dollar profit. When they sold their company 300 of their employees became instant millionaires. A couple of years ago Wagner spoke at a luncheon and said he had two rules before he would enter into a partnership with you. The first is that you would leave your current job immediately to pour all your energy into the new venture. The second rule is that you would empty your bank account of every penny to capitalize the new business. I don't know if Todd Wagner is a follower of Jesus but he clearly understands this parable better than many Christians I know.

III. The King will hold us accountable for what we do with what He owns. (vv. 19-30). The first two men hear the words, "Well done good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your master." Think about those words. First they provide a description of how God views those who invest what they have in the kingdom; "good and faithful." Secondly the payoff is the joy of the master. Last Thursday I gave my testimony at CR. I told how I craved my father's approval but I never heard him say he was proud of me. Over the years I have learned that what is most important in our Heavenly Father's approval – the joy of the master. Will I hear "well done?"

Sometimes I imagine standing before the Lord like the little boy with the one potato. "Look Jesus. I took good care of your flock. Aren't you proud of me? We had a wonderful church; great small groups, the music was awesome, you should have seen our facility." And then I hear Him say, "I entrusted you with millions of dollars every year. Did you expand My kingdom? Let's see, I have the tally sheet right here. Each conversion at your church cost about \$300,000. You spent most of the money keeping the customers satisfied. You never took any risks. You were more concerned with the temporary comfort of the people in the pews than you were with the eternal destinies of the people in the streets."

I don't want to have a conversation like that when Jesus returns. I want to know the joy of the Master. In order to do that we have to think differently about the resources God has given us. Let's summarize God's perspective on our use of His stuff.

1. Our possessions are a trust. *What you do with what you have is important to God.*

Notice the first words spoken by God to man? Gen. 1:28, "Take care of my stuff." In the beginning God entrusted man with the responsibility to care for everything He created. Write next to that verse, "It's not my stuff." We own nothing, we care for everything. God is the owner, we are the stewards. The best definition of stewardship I have seen is this, "Stewardship is protecting and growing the owner's assets with fierce intensity."

2. Our possessions are a test. *What you do with what you have reveals your spiritual condition.* Our financial life is a reflection of our spiritual lives. Jesus didn't separate the two. Modern man conveniently separates what God has joined together. It is a mistake to separate our financial decisions from our spiritual development. We think we can be irresponsible financially but responsible spiritually. Luke 16:11, "If you cannot be trusted with worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches?" Make no mistake, the use of stuff is a practical barometer of our spiritual condition that God monitors to determine our spiritual condition. The hard truth is that our bank statement is also a doctrinal statement.

Possessions are powerful, not just because of what they can accomplish in the world but because of what they can do to our souls. They can even shape our character. "Our perspective on and handling of money is a litmus test of our true character. It is an index of our spiritual life. Our stewardship of money tells a deep and consequential story. It forms our biography. In a sense, how we relate to money and possessions is the story of our lives." Randy Alcorn (*Money, Poss. And...*, p. 18)

The Bible provides an abundance of warnings about stuff. Remember the Parable of the Sower and the Seed? Jesus talks about a man, "who hears the word, but the worry of the world and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful." Mt. 13:22. Not only are we choking on our stuff but our stuff can choke the Word and it becomes unfruitful. God's life-giving message gets strangled by competing influences in our life. Our attachment to stuff can be a deadly distraction that kills our spiritual life. Possessions test our faith. Letting go of them is an act of faith in response to grace. We can say we have faith but to let go of my stuff I must believe that God is gracious and will continue to give.

3. Our possessions are a trademark. *What you do with what you have reveals what you believe about what you worship.* We give because God is generous. "God so loved the world He gave..." "God demonstrated His love for us in that while we were yet sinners He gave." That "He who did not spare His own Son...will freely give us all things." This is a profoundly different kind of God than the gods worshipped throughout history. Most gods are receiving gods not giving gods. You are required to give and to give and to give and still you are not sure if you have given enough. The Bible reveals that God does not view man as a means of revenue but as a channel through whom God pours out His grace upon others. We don't give to God we give to others in the Name of God. "Inasmuch as you have done it unto the least of these you have done it unto Me," Jesus said. Giving is the only reasonable act of worship toward a generous God.

One of the clearest indicators of a transformed life is a change of attitude toward money and

possessions. Luke 3:7-14 – every answer to the question, “what should we do?” involves money and possessions. Nothing reveals what we truly believe about God more than our use of money and possessions. We can wax eloquent about God all day long but in the end our bank statement and our doctrinal statement are one and the same.

Let’s do everything in our power to expand the kingdom of God. Let’s seek to grow our master’s assets with fierce intensity. Let’s take some big steps. I’ll never forget the couple in East Texas that helped our little church by donating an acre of their property right next to the church so the church could expand. When one of the elders went to thank them and nail down the details he said, “We’ll get a surveyor out here.” The owner said, “Don’t you know how much an acre is?” When the elder said he did the owner said, “Well then, get out there and walk it off!” As he was going out the door the wife followed the elder and whispered in his ear, “Take big steps!”

That’s the challenge this morning, “Take big steps.” We can play it safe and protect our assets or we can get off our assets and grow the kingdom with a fierce intensity. What does that look like corporately? I’m looking for 25 pioneers this morning, 25 people who are willing to let go of this location, this music, this preaching to go to another area of this city and launch a Jesus movement together. Are you willing to risk it? Ask God if you should be one of these pioneers.

What does this parable mean for you individually? Are you saving your money, your time, your talents? What you have will never grow until you risk and let it go! In his little book, *Don’t Waste Your Life*, John Piper says, “If our single, all-embracing passion is to make much of Christ, in life and death, and if the life that magnifies Him most is the life of costly love, then life is risk, and risk is right. To run from it is to waste your life.” A life is a terrible thing to waste. So as we close I want to invite you to let it go. I want to lead you in a time of prayer. Ask God what is it you need to turn loose of? Let’s pray... Your money? Your skills? Your time?

The promise is this: Use well what you have been given and even more will be given then you will have more than enough. (Mt. 25:29)