

Matthew 25:14-30

### **Active waiting**

### **Talents**

Talents is one of many words brought into the English language from scripture. In biblical times, a talent was a huge sum of money – something that most people would never have, indeed would find it hard to imagine. To a day labourer listening to Jesus’ parable – the sums were so vast as to be even beyond the stuff of dreams - Lottery jackpot. What we need to remember is that we don’t need to match up every aspect of a parable with the nature and actions of God. The king or landowner in the parable of the talents is described as harsh, demanding even cruel in some translations – none of which could ever be attributes of God. Not should we see the parable as an unqualified support of bare capitalism or tied labour! But there are lessons to be learned here – so let’s see if we can tease them out a bit – and perhaps learn one or two new ideas beyond what we already know about utilising our “talents”!

As we know even from way back in Old Testament times with the likes of Joseph – it was possible, even if uncommon, for a slave, servant, prisoner to impress the authorities and come to be put in charge of extensive responsibilities – usually because they had some skills or attributes which were particularly in demand or valuable to the powers that be. Character was often an important factor – so honesty, integrity and a high degree of trustworthiness counted for much especially if the ethos supported a good deal of underhand practices. There was however a clear demarcation between the owner/king/landowner on the one hand and the steward/servant/manager on the other. The former had all the rights, the latter could make a comfortable living if put in charge of big projects or resources BUT there was no mistake – the servant

or steward would never be the owner and woe betide any who got to thinking of themselves as such or regarding the resources under their charge as being for their own benefit – their role was clear – they had to look after everything FOR THE BENEFIT OF THEIR MASTER. They were accountable. That surely is something that applies to us – regardless of the scale of the responsibilities God has entrusted to us – we are accountable to him. We're not simply here to please ourselves.

### **Uneven distribution**

We can get all hot under the collar with pecking orders and our place compared to others. On the face of it, there's a lot of material here to fuel discussion of the relative importance of one task compared to another, of our role weighed against someone else's. In the story the different servants are charged with looking after hugely different amounts of money – it would seem – on the basis of their capabilities. How that was determined is unclear but I guess it made sense for the owner to bear in mind their abilities when assessing how to divide up the responsibilities for his vast wealth. Interesting though, the rewards offered to the first two servants when they reported on their stewardship was proportionately the same – AND both involved them being given – not monetary reward – but further responsibilities. Is it for us to argue over differences? Some would say, yes, but I have my doubts. It is abundantly clear that the world is a most unequal place – and huge efforts are needed to tackle all sorts of injustice – and maybe it is easier for us who have a roof over our heads, health provision that for all its shortcomings is still the envy of the world, and wealth beyond the wildest dreams of many – but even with all the caveats of seeking justice – there does still seem to be a place for people being entrusted with responsibility according to what they are capable of discharging – with two very clear safeguards: 1) all our abilities, skills, positive attributes – in short anything GOOD is us, comes by grace, as

a free gift from God – and not through our deserving and 2) as in the parable – we are stewards of everything we have in life, indeed stewards of who as well as what we are – and so are accountable to God. How many of us have properly grasped that? Not many I suspect – and if truth be told we’ve all fallen short on that score. So while it might appear that there has been an uneven distribution of the “good things that earth affords” we all need to remember that we are all accountable to God for the use to which we put what we’ve been entrusted with and the way we live our lives – so that seeking justice must be part of our calling – and ultimately we don’t own or have full control – we are all answerable to God. Thankfully, not to a harsh, demanding and cruel tyrant – but to a God who loves us, sent his Son to be our Saviour and is full of mercy and who is generous both with forgiveness and with restoration. He is willing to entrust us with aspects of his mission and kingdom even after we’ve messed up. So yes perhaps there is some “uneven distribution” but there is very much an equitable and generous readiness on God’s part to love, forgive and restore us in and through Jesus.

### **Active waiting**

I’m not withdrawing all the teaching that probably all of you have heard, perhaps many times, over the years about using your God given talents to good effect. Maybe you’ve had doubts about what talents you have (or wonder if you have any at all!). Perhaps you were brought up in an ethos that discouraged personal development, especially anything that had a whiff of blowing your own trumpet or making a name for yourself or making out that you were better than others. Discouraging self promotion is one thing, squashing ambition and self development is another thing altogether. I can’t have been the only youngster (or indeed adult) that has wondered whether they are a 10 talent, 5 talent or 1 talent person, possibly a zero talent person –

but that isn't what the parable is about at all. I firmly believe that God has given all of us gifts and talents with which to serve others and bring glory to his name. To that extent yes each and every one of us is talented, without exception. Not all talents will be easily recognised and we won't always manage to avoid that natural human trait (universally unhelpful) which seeks to make invidious comparison between the value or significance of one person's talent from another's. I remember a profoundly disabled youngster whose could "speak love and affection" with her eyes and smile – and convey that to pretty much anyone and soften the hardest heart. What value – monetary zilch! Real human benefit – priceless!

But the key to this passage is to recognise that possession isn't what matters, it's putting our gifts, talents, attributes, resources, LIFE to good use in our heavenly Master's loving service. The context of these passages in Matthew is one of preparation for the end time, for meeting with God. On the one hand it is a time of waiting – Jesus is clear – heaven would come, the world would end, each of us has a limited time on this earth but he was that it wasn't yet time for the end of the world – though let's face it, none of us knows how long we've got to live here. Jesus doesn't discount the significance of our earthly time – what we do here matters, what we experience of God's love and how we share it is vitally important – there was a common held view that Jesus was ushering in the kingdom of God there and then, heaven would be coming very soon, virtually immediately – so what was the point in mission, why bother to seek to live out Jesus' teaching? Instead, just rest up, pray and wait for heaven breaking. This parable isn't really about working out where you are in any pecking order, far less God's pecking order – it's about putting your God given gifts, indeed putting your God given LIFE to best effect in Jesus' service, living for his praise and glory, seeking to love him and your neighbour, in thought, word and

action advancing his kingdom of love right now, right where you are and looking to do your utmost to make this world a more heavenly place.

It's about waiting yes – because we're not in heaven yet, we've still to meet Christ face to face – but it is an ACTIVE waiting – not a twiddling of thumbs time but a time for utilising all the grace gifts of love and service that are ours in Jesus (and for which we have to account) not to fuel pride or self centredness but to further God's plans and purposes of love. What a wonderful calling! What a great purpose for our lives! Don't doubt yourself – don't doubt Jesus' ability to make something of your life – whatever age or state – Be active – if not at the gym – certainly in living for the Saviour, using all that he has given you – to love and serve – to prepare the way of the Lord.

And finally, in thinking about the end of time, or our time remember “Fear not, I have redeemed you. You are mine.” The greatest accolade any human being can receive is to hear the words of the Saviour “Well done good and faithful servant – enter now into your rest” – that comes only as a gift of grace from God.

May the Lord bless you.

Amen.