

# **A Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church**

**By Eric Howell**

**Matthew 25:14-30**

**November 16, 2008**

For the kingdom of heaven is like these three servants whose master left them to go on a trip. Before he left, he called them into his office and entrusted each one of them with something called talents. Talents had had nothing to do with whether you could play the piano, tap dance, or dunk a basketball. Talents were a measure of wealth, and the amounts here were HUGE. Even the guy who was given only one talent was entrusted with something equal to about half a lifetime of work. No instructions.

This is life, right? We have this gift—we know it's precious and it's finite, we only have one chance at it, and there's no blueprint for how to live it. The Bible isn't an owner's manual; it's a story with some instructions, some inspiration, some reflection, but mostly it's a story. When we read this story, what we believe is that life is not only a gift, but also a trust. We have been entrusted with this life—now what are you going to do with it?

That's essentially the message of the parable Jesus tells to give us a window into the kingdom of God. It's about what you do with what you've got. So in the story, there are two basic responses. The first two servants get right to work and they are successful at their work. The one who is given five talents gets to work and turns it into ten. The one who is given two talents gets to work and turns it into four. They maximize their resources according to their ability. They do well and good things happen. This is mainstream Old Testament theology at work. If you do well, you will have a good result. If you are good, you will be blessed. If you are evidently blessed, you must be good and have done well. There is much of life that is like this. There are consequences to actions. If you study hard, you are likely to do well on the exam. If you obey the speed limit and stop at red lights, you are likely to arrive at your destination safely. The converse is also true. If you don't study, you'll fail. If you drive ninety miles per hour, eventually you'll get a ticket . . . if you're lucky. Life is about consequences. Use what you've got to the best of your ability.

This is the first response in the parable. One wonders what would have happened in the story if they had taken their talents, put them to work, but market forces, unfortunate timing, or events out of their control had produced the result that five talents were turned into say seven, instead of ten, or the guy with two did his best with the two but he only came back with three. What would have been the response of the master? Is being a good and faithful servant about your effectiveness or your intentions? In the way the story was told, good intentions led to effectiveness, but which is most valued? If you are a professor in a class and a student makes a C, but you know that student really, really wanted to do well, is she a good and faithful student? Is it about results or intentions? If your stockbroker brings you back a three percent return on your IRA are you as happy with him as had he doubled your money?

Because that's life, too. Sometimes you try something and you get lucky. The guy who invented the hula-hoop? It's a plastic circle. Monopoly? It's a game that never ends.

Sometimes we do our very best with the best intentions and it still doesn't work out. The Old Testament has a minority tradition regarding this experience in life. The author of Ecclesiastes comes across as a grumpy old man, looking back over life and reflecting on what life is all about. The standard interpretation of life is: if you are good, God will be good to you. But the author observes: the rain falls on the righteous and unrighteous. Both good and evil happen to everyone. We know this to be true. Sometimes you try your best and it doesn't work out the way you wanted it to. You give everything you've got to your marriage, but neither counseling nor prayer nor anything else can make the relationship work. You own a company making widgets and try your best, you just can't keep up and you have to shutter your doors.

I'm guessing that in the story, the master's effusive praise is not so much offered because the servants returned maximized results, as that their maximized returns were fortunate, abundant results of their abilities and efforts.

There are two very different responses to the challenge posed in the parable. The first is the person who takes what she has been given and does her very best with it, whatever the results may be. This may be you. Maybe you are a person who genuinely has done well with what you were given. Good for you. Keep it up. Well done.

The second response is much different. The third servant takes the talent, which though just one talent is still a sizeable sum. He digs a hole and buries it in the ground. Buried treasure, hidden in a field. Which is interesting because Jesus tells another story about treasure buried in a field, comparing the kingdom of God to a man who finds treasure buried in a field and then sells everything he has to buy the field. So here's the back-story of the guy who actually puts it in the ground. Which has me thinking of pirates and buried treasure. We've had fun with that idea in our house in recent years as we've done the pirate theme for a birthday party and had a scavenger hunt where a big 'X' marked the spot. What else would, right?

We are not told what the servant did after burying the treasure. Maybe he sat there, smugly congratulating himself for his resourcefulness and creativity. Maybe he sat guard over the overturned dirt in the field until the grass grew over it and covered it up. Maybe he forgot about it, and now free from his master who is long gone, and from any reminder of responsibility which is now buried, perhaps he went on to live his life as a well-adjusted modern, untethered to a community of moral vision or his identity as a creature of God. Perhaps, now that the unwelcome reminder of his servitude was buried behind him, he thought smugly about those others who embraced their servanthood when all the while, they could be living the independent, self-satisfied, self-made life that he's living now, a moral free-agent, an enlightened citizen of modernity who is an island unto himself, a self-determined being. Maybe he read Descartes and agreed, "I think, therefore I am". Maybe he just went about his life's business, neither conscious of nor concerned with the gift that had been entrusted to him—not just of the talent, but that his very life was a gift of unrivaled grace. But maybe, with wistful regret, he sometimes

wondered what could have been, what he could have been, had he not buried the gift and in the process buried himself.

One day the master returns. Upon hearing this news, this third individual, self-made man, is now suddenly a servant again. He never really stopped being one. He just stopped serving. He runs, gets a shovel, goes out and digs it up. He brushes the dust off of it. Maybe he even shines it up a bit. Like a cat with yard treasure, he hauls it back to the master and lays it at his feet. The master looks down at it and looks up at him. They stare in a moment of silence as the reality of what has happened dawns on the hardening face of the master and what is about to happen dawns on the drooping face of the servant. He preemptively strikes, “I knew you were harsh, reaping where you do not sow, gathering where you scattered no seed. So I buried it in the ground. Here is what is yours. Take it back.”

The master is not pleased. Completely ignoring the thing between them, his attention is focused on the servant. People are more important than things to the master. He is more concerned about what happens in a person than what can be done through a person. This is where the servant miscalculated. He was a servant entrusted with a talent. The talent always belonged to the master. True. But so did he. He belonged to the master as well. The first two servants understood that not only this talent belonged to the master, but their lives belonged to him, too.

The third servant calculated that the external resource belonged to the master. He saw that rightly. But he for whatever reason did not see that he himself—all he was, and is—also belongs to his master. It’s not about what he does with the resource; it’s about what he allows to be done in himself.

When people read this story, they play a little game called “How many talents do I have?” One? Two? Five? Forty-one? But it’s not about keeping score. I mean, scores aren’t important in parables or football games, right? When you find yourself in the story, you are not just a servant with a certain number of talents with which to work. You are the talent itself. What you do with the resources God gives you is actually what you are doing with the only life you’ve got.

Why would someone bury their talent and themselves? Some people, who others might say have all kinds of talents, conclude about themselves that all they are good for is to be buried in a hole and forgotten. They evaluate themselves by the harshest criteria and bury themselves in a mound of lies.

“God knows what I’ve done in the past. I messed up so badly and sinned. The people God uses are good people. I’m disqualified. Bury me.”

“God knows what’s happened to me in my past. The pain and confusion from those experiences are still with me, clouding my judgment, invading my nightmares. The people God uses are healthy people. I’m damaged goods. Bury me.”

“God knows how I’m living my life now. I’ve compromised ethics; I’ve hurt people along the way. And now I’m in deep. I’m stuck on a one-way road and can’t go back, and can’t figure out how to go forward. I’m stuck. Bury me.”

“God knows I have doubts. It seems like other people have faith, but I just have nagging questions. I keep going along because I like church and being a part is better than being honest about my struggles. But I’m such a doubter. Bury me.”

“I’m a woman and they said I can’t lead.” “I’m young and they said I’m too naïve.” “I’m an old man and they said my time is past.” “Bury me. Bury me under a mound of shame, sin, grief, doubt, insecurity, and loneliness.”

We will not bury you. You are the treasure hidden in the field. By the grace of God, if we have to, we will dig you up and dust you off and present you to our Lord, the servant of all; the one with two, five, ten, countless talents—that you may be added not just to his, but added to him, grafted on to him, and that in-so-being, you may find your place with all the other servants now found and redeemed and used by the One who is always faithful and good. And what we find in our redemption is a shovel in our hands, that we may join the search for buried treasure in the fields of our workplaces, neighborhoods, families, looking for other treasures that are hidden.

And one day maybe you’ll come back across that empty hole that once encased you and owned you and kept you from being all who God knows you really are. Maybe as you freely and joyfully serve your master and find yourself being more and blessing others more than you ever thought possible, you’ll come across that reminder of how you once thought God to only be a harsh, demanding, angry deity who asked more of you than you could possibly give. Maybe you’ll lean on your shovel for a moment, and peer down that old, dark, bottomless hole inside your self and remember that in many ways, maybe in every way, you put yourself in that hole and covered yourself up. And you’ll wonder how that tomb for your true self once felt like a safe place to hide.

Maybe you’ll see that empty tomb from which you have been redeemed and risen to a new life of grace and service. You’ll know it when you see it. A cross marks the spot.

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