

Using Our Talents

November 15, 2020

Matthew 25:14-30

When I was a kid, Nickelodeon had a game show titled “Figure It Out,” where stars on Nickelodeon at the time tried to figure out the talents or accomplishments of the child guests. Kids came on with all sorts of talents, everything from “being able to spit a watermelon seed 20 feet” to “teaching a squirrel how to waterski” to a whole host of other talents and accomplishments. As a kid, I wanted to get on the show because, at the age of six or seven, while other kids were making fart sounds by putting their hands in their armpits, I discovered that I could make those same sounds with the backs of my knees. Granted, I was a young boy who was very easily entertained and who found bathroom humor amusing. Still, I was proud of that talent, I thought it would have been fun to get on that show, and oh how I wanted to share my talent with the world. It’s funny to think about in retrospect, and Lord only knows how embarrassed my parents would have been had I actually tried out for the show, much less got on it. Still, I was raised to be a good Christian, and Christians share their talents with the world. This is what the reading for today teaches: that we must share our talents with the world, lest we be punished and labeled “lazy and wicked servants.”

In the reading for today, we have another parable that has to do with Jesus’ Second Coming. The master, representative of Jesus, leaves his slaves talents depending on their abilities, departing then for an unknown period of time. The first two, given five and two talents respectively, begin to make use of those talents. The third slave, though, he buries it and makes no usage of it. When the master returns an undisclosed period of time later, he immediately goes to settle accounts with the slaves. The one who had been given five returns ten. The one who had been given two returns four. Both of them are praised and rewarded for their efforts. The third slave, though, he digs up the talent he buried and returns it to the master. For that, he is called a “wicked and lazy servant” and is thrown out into the darkness. While we in the modern day might deem such a reaction as harsh, it nonetheless drives the point home that we are to make use of the talents we have been given and to not let them go to waste. Jesus has left for an unknown period of time to return at a day and hour that only the Father knows, and we have been left with talents to use in this time of anticipation and waiting. However, a point of clarification to be made is just what is being talked about here when we speak of “talents,” because what we understand as a “talent” and what the initial audience would have understood as a “talent” are two completely different things it turns out.

What the initial audience would have understood when they heard the slaves were given “talents” was they were given money, and a lot of it, roughly \$1M in modern terms per talent. So, the first slave was given \$5M and returned \$10M back to the master. The second slave was given \$2M and returned \$4M back to the master. The third was given \$1M and returned that money back when the master returned down to the last penny. In all three cases, they were given very large sums of money and expected to make use of that money. The first two, they double the initial amount and returned the initial amount plus the profits back to the master down to the last penny, not keeping any of it for themselves or using any of the initial amount on themselves. The third slave though, the “lazy and wicked” slave, does nothing. He settles the debt, and that’s it. In his being reprimanded, the master says to him he at least could have given the talent to the bank where it might have collected interest. The way this is worded gives of the air that investing the talent in a bank is a less-favorable option but is still better than what the third slave did. This makes us then wonder what the other two did that they were able to give back double what they were initially given and to be praised as they were. If they did nothing with it, they would have given back as much as they were given by the master. So, they didn’t do nothing.

They also didn't use it on themselves, lest they would have returned less than they were initially given. So, they didn't do that either. Thirdly, they didn't invest it in the bank, or at least, we're not told they do that. We are told that they made more talents, as if they put it to use another way. So, if they didn't keep it to themselves, they didn't use it for self-enrichment, and they didn't invest it in the bank, the most-plausible explanation would be they lent it out and shared it with those in the community, those in need of a loan, potentially putting a very high interest rate on it, maybe even as much as 100%. Regardless, the most-plausible explanation is that they shared it with the community and put it to use. In short, they "shared the wealth." This however only speaks to **one definition of a "talent."**

The second definition of a "talent" is what you and I understand a talent as being: a skill or ability. All of us have skills and abilities gifted to us through the Holy Spirit that we are charged to use for furthering God's kingdom and making the Word of God known. In other words, we are to share these talents with the world and not keep them for ourselves. Our using these talents is not for our own personal benefit, but rather is for the benefit our master, the Triune God. That could be listening to someone when they are sad and need a listening ear. That could be helping a person to move furniture in, out, or around their house. That could be fixing something for someone else. No matter what your skill or skills, they are on loan to you (as we spoke about some weeks ago) for you to use for the furthering of God's kingdom and in humble service to others.

Regardless of which definition we go with, though, there are some common threads between them that still hold true. First and foremost, these talents the slaves are given (and those that we are given for that matter) are not our own. They are given by God, and they are God's, not ours. In all truth, the only one in the story who benefits from the talents directly is the master. The slaves do not get to keep any of the talents they are given, meaning they are not personally benefitting from them. Those talents are not enriching or empowering them in any way. They start as slaves, and they are still slaves at the end. So too is this the case with our talents. Having those skills and abilities serve no purpose in themselves. They do not enrich or empower us in and of themselves. Having a certain skill or talent does not elevate us to superhuman status. It is through the usage of those talents that fulfillment and benefits are found, both for the slaves in the story and for us. That's the second common thread between the two. Talents in both cases are meant to be shared and used. Any benefit we find through our skills, any benefits the slaves in the story have, is not found through the talent itself, but through its usage. The first two slaves benefitted and were rewarded not because they had talents at the end, but because they used those talents. At the end of days, we will be rewarded not because we were a builder, a baker, a candlestick maker, whatever we were, but because we used those skills. We put them to use in the name of and for spreading of the kingdom of God.

Therefore, the main take away from this story is that we need to make use of the talents we have been given. No talent is too great or too small to be used, and no talent is greater or lesser than any other. Granted, what purpose making fart sounds with my knees serves is beyond me, but the laughter caused by such childish innocence, that might help those who are feeling low to elevate their spirits and to take their minds off of whatever is making them feel low, even just for a moment. God has graciously given them to us that we might use them to further His Kingdom, to share the Love of God to all the ends of the earth, to humbly serve our neighbors, and to be makers of peace. Therefore, I ask you all, how well are you putting your talents to work?