

The Talents

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[0 : 00] This morning we're in the middle of a series on the parables of Jesus. Jesus told stories of everyday life in order that he might make a spiritual point very often.

! So before we come to preach God's word, why don't we bow our heads and pray together. Our gracious Father, we thank you for your word.

And we thank you that the Lord Jesus taught us that your word is truth. And Lord, we pray that as we learn together today, Father God, you would not make us just want to be receivers of information, but Lord, we might become agents of transformation.

Jesus said that the harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few. Lord, we pray that those of us who are laborers would do what we can to bring your kingdom.

And we pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen. So as I said, we've come this morning to a point where we're talking about the parable of the talents, which is the scripture that Catherine just read for us.

[1 : 32] It's a parable which I think, like many parables, is prone to misunderstanding. If you are a entrepreneur in this congregation and you are thinking to yourself, well, here's biblical justification for market capitalism, you're probably not really understanding it.

And I want to labor, if I may, this morning, a little bit on the introduction because it's really important that you understand a little bit about the background to this.

And to know that, we need to look in the previous chapter, chapter 24. And in that chapter, Jesus himself is prophesying the events that will precede his return to earth.

And it's a pretty shattering resume, I think you would agree with me. Let me just read a little bit of that. He says, Watch out that no one deceives you, there will be deception.

Many will come in my name, claiming I am the Christ, and will deceive many. You will hear of wars and rumors of wars. See that you're not alarmed.

[2 : 49] Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. Nation will rise against nation and kingdom against kingdom. There will be famines, earthquakes in various places.

All these are the beginning of the birth pangs. In other words, what's about to follow in chapter 24 is Jesus addressing his disciples.

We know that he was talking to his disciples because it tells us in chapter 24 and verse 3, as Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately.

Tell us, they said. Tell us, when will the end happen? And what will be the signs of your coming and of the end of the age?

The rest of chapter 24 and 25 is there to prepare disciples, people like you and me, for that time when the Lord will return.

[3 : 55] And I know that it's 2,000 years now since Jesus said those things. And though in our heads we know that Jesus promises to return, in our hearts, many of us, I think, find that very hard to appropriate.

I love the story of the Methodist minister who was approached by the Jehovah's Witness leader.

And the Jehovah's Witness leader said to the Methodist minister, could we borrow some chairs from your church for our Sunday night meeting? The Methodist minister was interested into why this might be and asked, why do you need more chairs for Sunday evening?

He said, well, we've calculated that the world will end on Sunday evening at 8 o'clock. The Methodist minister looked distinctly worried.

He said to the men, so when will I get the chairs back? And the Jehovah's Witness said, Monday morning. The point is, the idea of the Lord's return is a little distant to us.

[5 : 09] And yet, it is very central to the core teaching of the New Testament, and indeed the Old Testament, as we heard a little earlier from the book of Malachi.

There is more about the Second Coming of the New Testament than there is about Holy Communion, than there is about lots of subjects which are second nature to us.

But we tend to be a little iffy around the Second Coming of Jesus. First time Jesus came, he came not to judge, but to save.

The second time Scripture teaches us, he will come to judge. Friends, there will be a day when you will face judgment.

I don't know how much time you think reflecting on that. But you will be judged. If you are a believer, then you will not be judged on your family relationship with God.

[6 : 24] You will be judged on whether you, if I might quote Ephesians chapter 2, verses 8 and 9, you will be judged on, have you received Christ by grace through faith?

That's God's amazing plan to help human beings like us escape the consequences of our sin. It is by grace you've been saved through faith, so that you can't boast.

And this parable is one of those parables, which is meant to prepare us for that time when the Lord will return.

That's the most important thing to remember about this. If I were to put it in a simple sentence, I would say, the meaning of this parable is, when the Master returns, will he find you faithful?

And by faithful, the Bible doesn't just mean, you know, faith like it's some kind of abstract gas that, you know, I might breathe in occasionally. It means that you have trusted the promises of God for your salvation.

[7 : 35] And it also means that you've worked hard to build his kingdom here on earth. And here's the massive distinction. You will not be saved by your effort. You don't need to be.

But as James put it in chapter 3 and verse 17 of his book, he said, faith without action is what? A dead thing.

We're not saved by our effort, but we are saved for effort to bring the kingdom of God in. Christianity is not a spectator sport. Because faith without action is a dead thing.

Now, I want to teach you something really fundamental in terms of your journey through life with Jesus Christ. And it's to do with the way that we interpret the Bible.

There are basically two fundamental ways that we think about the Bible. Two words that sound a bit tricky. The first one is the word exegesis.

[8 : 46] If you've not got your teeth in properly, don't say it. Exegesis. What that means is, and Luther put it very well, Martin Luther the reformer, Martin Luther said, let the text speak for itself.

In other words, exegesis is taking the Bible, trying to explain the context, as I've just been trying to do, trying to explain the language, as I hope to do, and to interpret the meaning of it from the text.

And where the text is obscure, what people who believe in exegesis do is, they use the Bible to interpret other bits of the Bible. So we don't just take one verse and build a doctrine on it.

We look at the whole of Scripture and build our doctrine upon that. Since the end of the 19th century, another way of interpreting the Bible has gathered pace.

It's called eisegesis. And eisegesis is where we read back into Scripture our own ideas. It sounds weird that anybody would do that, but trust me, that explains a lot.

[10:06] And as we'll see in a few moments' time, this parable, and the way it's been interpreted in history, and more recently, explains very well what eisegesis is.

I want to tell you that I think you're very blessed because in this church, we believe in exegesis. We believe that we should let the text speak for itself.

But there are many churches up and down this land that believe in eisegesis. And the problem is, it's not quite as clear-cut as I've just made it sound.

I think there are moments when those of us who are into exegesis actually do read back in the Scripture some of our ideas.

So in this church, we don't insist that every woman comes to church with a hat on. We don't tell people what they should eat. Oh, you shouldn't eat seafood or pork because the Bible says so.

[11:08] I mean, you might not eat seafood or pork because you're a vegan or a vegetarian. That's a different reason. So it's not quite as clear-cut as I made it sound. But generally speaking, we would stand on the side of letting the text speak for itself.

Now, this parable is very interesting to me because historically and traditionally, the church has interpreted this particular parable in this way.

The first thing is, in the parable, the church has obviously equated the master in the story as God or Christ. Secondly, it's interpreted the servants as believers entrusted with gifts, abilities, resources, and opportunities.

The third part of the interpretation is that talents relate to our God-given resources. When the Bible's talking about talents, it's not talking about talent in the way we usually think about it.

It's not thinking of Britain's got talent, which apparently it does. It's thinking about talents in the sense that our translation of the Bible that Catherine read for us talks about bags of gold.

[12:33] It was about money. And in fact, one talent in today's money would be 20 years' wages. So you're given five talents. You've been given a hundred years' worth of wages.

The first two servants in the traditional interpretation are faithful disciples who use what God gives to advance his kingdom.

The third servant is unfaithful, lazy, and fearful, and who fails to use God's resources for God's purposes. We can say with confidence from the traditional reading of this parable, firstly, that the Master will return, Christ will return.

I've taught you about that. Secondly, his servants will be judged by the Master. And thirdly, their family relationship with God won't be brought into question.

But more along the lines of what did you do with what God gave you? Now, I want you, if you would, to contrast this with the modern eisegetical interpretation.

[13:51] In that interpretation, the Master is a wealthy, exploitative landowner. The servants are agents of the Master's exploitation.

The talents are vast sums of money obtained through unjust systems. The first two servants are complicit in that exploitation.

And the third servant becomes the hero under this interpretation. The morally courageous whistleblower who refuses to be complicit with unjust systems.

The Master's return is the corrupt power demanding profit and punishing non-compliance. And the main message of that eisegetical explanation is God's kingdom is unlike exploitative economies.

Now, friends, we will have in church this morning different understandings. and I would say myself that the more modern translation of that parable I think is making some good points.

[15:13] I just don't think that those good points emerge from this particular parable. Is that clear? So it's making good points. I think our world suffers from exploitation.

We call it greedy capitalism these days. It doesn't mean that all capitalism is wrong or it has to be you know, it is inherently greedy. But it does mean that you can't use this parable as a basis to dictate what economic system they will be.

So, my introduction over. Verse 1 of chapter 25 tells us it says it will be like a man.

What is the it? It means the end of time. That's what Jesus has been talking about in chapter 24. The parable of the ten virgins the message of that is be prepared for the Lord's return.

Incidentally, there's a church in High Wickham that used to do this wayside pulpit thing and they would put the titles of their sermons on the wayside pulpit, this big kind of notice board and the morning sermon was about the work of Jesus on the cross and the title of the sermon was What Can One Man Do?

[16:41] In the evening they were talking about the parable of the virgins and so it read on the notice board What Can One Man Do?

And then it said ten unprepared virgins. Think about it. So the it in this story is the return of Jesus and amazingly the master calls his servants and entrusts to them his property.

Well obviously it doesn't mean that this is about our material goods alone though it does include them. What it means is that God has entrusted to his church his disciples a legacy and the legacy is put in Matthew's gospel at the end going to all the world and make disciples of all people baptize them in the name of the father and the son and the holy spirit.

What God has bequeathed to us is the task of building his kingdom here on earth. And what this parable gets after is what part are you playing in that?

We have three interesting examples here of people who are playing their part or not. The first one he decides to give five talents to.

[18:21] It's interesting isn't it that the master in this story doesn't give all disciples equal talents. The Bible is very clear that we're all equal before God but that's different than saying we're the same.

People have different gifts and abilities. People have different levels of intellect. We're not the same.

And the master hands out the talents on the basis of the way he understands it. I imagine the one who got five talents was a very entrepreneurial self-motivated kind of leader in the organization.

foundation and the master takes the view this person can be entrusted with a hundred years worth of wages. The second one less so.

And the last one I think that probably one of these people who found it even difficult to get up in the morning and get to work on time. And he gives him one talent and you know the way the story goes.

[19 : 29] The one with five talents fulfills the master's confidence in him and makes a load of money. The second one does pretty well also.

The third one. And this is the terrible point of this service. Of the one who went and buried his talent in a field and then dug it up when the master returns.

The master's judgment over this person is take the talent from him and give it to the one who has the ten talents. For everyone who has will be given more and he will have an abundance.

Whoever does not have even what he has will be taken from him. Listen, I'm not here this morning to shame you, to make you feel bad about what you're not doing.

But what I want to do is try to encourage you to believe one of two things. The first thing is whether you feel it or not, God has given you gifts if you are his disciple.

[20 : 46] The Bible gives us some lists of those gifts. They're not exhaustive, but you can read about them in Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12. They're not all spooky gifts like prophecy and the gift of tongues, though they are included.

But some of them are very basic, important gifts for the building of God's kingdom. In Romans we're told that leadership is important. We're told that administration is important.

This is a story that tells us that unproductive disciples are not really disciples at all.

And you notice in this story that the guy who just had one talent, he says this to God, Master, I know that you're a hard man, harvesting where you've not sown and gathering where you've not scattered seeds, so I was afraid and went out and hid your talent in the ground.

See, here is what belongs to you. See, the problem for this guy is, his idea of God was all wrong. The Bible reveals God to be merciful.

[22 : 01] This man thought God was just a kind of hard case, impossible to please. We might say that this is the kind of person who uses the right language around religion but truly does not believe in the God of the Bible.

Jesus says, doesn't he, in Matthew 7, verse 21, not everyone who says to me, Lord, Lord, will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only those who do the will of my Father.

God's got a plan for your life. And you need to work it out and you need to go do it. I wonder, I wonder, how many of us sitting in church today are even aware that God gives us gifts, but secondly, if we are aware of that, do we know what those gifts are?

And there are various ways you can discover this. I mean, you can go and talk with a friend who loves you enough to tell you the truth and say, if you ever think you're leaning towards a particular gift, go and talk it through with a friend who you trust, who loves you enough to tell you the truth.

The reason I say that is we can be deluded. We can think we're good at stuff that nobody else on planet earth thinks we're good at. Imagine, friends, imagine a church where every member took their talents, to use the language of the New Testament, and used them to glorify God, to edify the church, and to serve the world.

[24 : 00] Imagine, we had people, as we're blessed in this church with, we need some more, but we're blessed with the ones we have, who have a gift for teaching our children.

children. Imagine that the people who were teaching our children were the people who were gifted to teach our children. Imagine a church where people who preached messages had a gift for communication.

What a wild idea. See, that's the way the body is supposed to work. Paul uses that image, doesn't he, in 1 Corinthians, when he talks about the church as a body, where the parts are different, but they're meant to work in harmony with one another.

I used to do a family service talk in the days when I was keen on that stuff, and I made this giant puzzle, jigsaw puzzle, puzzle.

And I take the puzzle, and we talk about it, and each puzzle has a different gift on it, put it together, and then, how frustrating is this, when you end a puzzle and you can't find the last piece.

[25 : 25] So I made a big play of not being able to find the last piece, but of course the last piece had the word you written on it. And if you're not playing your part, the church can never be fully functional.

Christianity is not a spectator sport. And you remember that there's a very interesting little verse here.

When the master is commanding the servant who's made five talents, he says, well done, good and faithful. You've been faithful with a few things.

I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness. I want to end by just reflecting something that I found true, having had a ministry for the past 30 years, which has taken me into a different church almost every Sunday.

And it's this, that there are a lot of people who sit in our churches frustrated Sunday by Sunday. Whatever sharing in the master's joy is, it's not self-evidently true.

[26 : 47] true. And, you know, that experience, which, I mean, there are some companies which are really good at, but you know, when you've got something, either it doesn't work or, you know, I mean, I am the world's worst do-it-yourself guy, okay?

I mean, most of the houses we've lived in have been a testimony to my bodging attempts. My shells look great, providing you look like that.

Okay? And there are two words which fill a person like me with fear, and those two words are flat packed. And I remember one day I got this bathroom cabinet from, I think I can say the name, you guessed it anyway, Ikea, flat packed.

Took me four days to get it to the point where I couldn't take it apart and I couldn't finish it. So I took it back. And they said, you can't bring that back. I said, well, I get that in a way, but here's my point.

The instructions aren't that clear. And so I said, well, what do you want? So I said, I want my money back. And just to conflate the message I got from Ikea, it was, well, you can go and whistle for that.

[28 : 25] Oftentimes, we struggle to get our money back. And I say that to you, because metaphorically thinking, I think there are people who sit in churches Sunday by Sunday.

And metaphorically speaking, they want their money back. I don't mean they want their giving back. I mean, they're just frustrated by it. And I want to leave you with this thought.

You want to share in the master's happiness? Find out the gifts that God has given you. Offer them to him, and you will find a joy that today you cannot begin to imagine.

But this parable is not just about practical advice, it's about an important spiritual message, a chilling spiritual message. And that is, for all the talk of inclusion in our culture today, much of which I think is very helpful, some of which I think is strange.

But the frightening thing is the very final verse of the reading that we had. It's the kind of verse, I think, that many of us, if we had, you know, one of those pens that makes writing indelible, we'd like to do it over this verse.

[29 : 53] The very last verse of the parable of the talents. Speaking of the servant who had buried the one talent he got and then tried to give it back to his master.

The master says, and throw that worthless servant outside into the darkness where there will be a weeping and gnashing of teeth.

the Bible says, you're God's workmanship. He has crafted you.

I know some of us, I put myself ahead of the queue, look in the mirror and think to yourself, I wish it could have just been a little long lasting than it is. But you're God's workmanship.

You can look in a mirror and remind yourself of that every day. I have God's workmanship. He's put me together. Okay, I've got some stuff that messes me up, but Jesus can heal me from that stuff and set me free.

[31:11] Free to do what? Free to do what I want? No. Free to do what God wants? Yes. Go into all the world.

And make disciples of all nations and baptize them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. That's the work that God has entrusted to us.

And together, God willing, we have the resources to make that happen. And you are part of that picture.

Let's pray. God, I'm our gracious Lord, we thank you for your word. Thank you again that it is truth. And Lord, we really don't want to just be cold processes of truth.

But Lord, we want to play our part in your great plan to save the world. world. And Lord, whatever our gifts are, we pray that you would help us to know what they are and to offer them to you, that we might glorify your wonderful name, edify your amazing church, and serve the world which is in such need at this time.

[32:37] And we pray these things together, Father, and the people who agreed said together. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.