

TRINITY SUNDAY - Multipliers of Grace

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Preacher: Peter Corney

[0 : 00] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 10th of June 2001. The preacher is Peter Corney.

His sermon is entitled Multipliers of Grace and is from Matthew chapter 25 verses 14 to 30. Well firstly thank you Paul for your welcome. It's great to be back here again. I've seen a few familiar faces already today.

The passage that we're going to look at this morning is from Matthew's Gospel chapter 25. It was read for us in the Gospel this morning. So if you have a Bible there you might like to open it in front of you.

Matthew 25 verse 14. It's commonly known as the Parable of the Talents. A very well known parable.

[1 : 00] But of course that title is not in the original text. It's one that's been put into the text by the editors. And so we could give the parable another title. And in fact the title that I've given it is the Venture Capital Parable.

Or if you like the parable of the investment opportunity of a lifetime. If you were to put into common idiom the punchline of the story, and perhaps if Jesus had told the story today, he might have said that the punchline is show me the money.

Show me the money. In the end Jesus will say to each one of us, show me the money.

This is a story about an opportunity grasped and an opportunity lost. Three people are given a great opportunity. They're entrusted with resources that are not theirs, that are given to them as a gift. They're encouraged to develop them, to multiply them, to grow them. Two of the people grasp the opportunity and one doesn't.

[2 : 22] Now why does one person fail to grasp the opportunity? The answer is given to you in verse 25 in one word.

And the word is fear. I was afraid and went out and hid your talent in the ground. And the Greek word here is phobia.

Phobia. Fear is one of the most crippling of all emotions and states of mind. Fear stops us from trying new things, from meeting new people, from going to new places.

Fear stops us from growing and developing, from learning new skills. Fear stops us from taking risks. Now sometimes that's good, other times it's bad.

Fear is the greatest emotional barrier to change. Some of you would know that I've written a little book called Change and the Local Congregation. It's a book about trying to help congregations face change and grapple with it constructively and positively.

[3 : 35] Now in my present work I get asked to help churches work through the issues of change. And one of the interesting things is that change agents, that is people who try to bring about change, often bring to a congregation or to an organisation a whole set of logical reasons about why they should change from this to that or stop doing this and start doing that.

But frequently, once this carefully thought out paper or argument is presented to people, people will often at first say, no.

And the change agent thinks, what's wrong with these people? Have they left their brains at the door? The answer is no, they haven't left their brains at the door but what they're reacting with initially is their emotions, which is true for all of us.

When we're all faced with some significant or major change, we tend to respond emotionally, rather initially than reasonably. And the greatest response usually is fear, the emotion of fear, particularly if the change is significant.

Fear of breaking up the familiar, fear of a loss of things that we value, fear of damage to the organisation that we're part of. Maybe this change will not be for the best, maybe it won't work out the way everybody says it will.

[5 : 05] Fear of the unknown, fear of the untried. Fear is a very powerful emotion. Some people of course have fears that are so severe, we actually use the Greek word to label them, we call them phobias.

There are some people who can't go into a crowd because they have this phobia, this fear of crowds of people. Some people who can't go up a second or a third story of a building. People who can't go into enclosed spaces, they can't get into a lift because they just feel terrified about the size of the space that they're in. And these fears for these people are paralyses. Now fortunately, most of us don't suffer from these. But there is a fear that is common to almost all of us. And it's the fear of failure.

It may have originated in some childhood experience. Who knows? That's being sort of put down, some kind of negative comments about us as a child. The extraordinary thing is that most of us have a fear of failure.

[6 : 19] Some greater than others. My wife is an artist. She is a watercolour artist. She teaches watercolour painting. And she often has people come to her in midlife, perhaps women whose kids are off their hands and they've got a bit of spare time and they want to do something new.

Or men who've retired early. And the fascinating thing is with these people who've perhaps never painted before, almost always when they come they say, well of course, I'm not artistic and I'm not very good and I don't know why I'm here really but there is this kind of inbuilt fear that they can't do it.

They can't put brush to paper. And it takes quite a while to take people through this barrier. Somehow or another in our educational system or somewhere along the line, the belief in our own personal creativity is crushed.

Now my wife says that everybody can be taught to paint reasonably well. Some people will be better because they're naturally gifted but everybody can be taught to paint. And I can hear people in the audience here now saying, oh except me.

But it's possible. It's possible. The greatest problem is the barrier within yourself actually. And if that can be overcome you will be able to. Two years ago our faithful old dog died.

[7 : 43] And after 14 years and foolishly we decided to get another one. But we thought we can't go through the puppy stage again. You know, digging holes and chewing things up and all that kind of stuff.

So we'll get a really grown one. So we went to the RSPCA and we got this nice little dog who was about 18 months old. Well, it was a mistake because we didn't know the history of this dog and it turned out that the little dog had been badly treated and she was very fearful and nervous and all this kind of thing.

And so it took us another two years to kind of straighten this dog out with love and kindness. But people are like that. I mean, some people are like that. They've been so badly treated by life or experiences in their youth that they are just afraid of everything, full of fear.

Over the years I've seen so many people fail to realise their potential, fail to develop as Christians and use their abilities because they were afraid.

Afraid of failure. Or afraid that what they did wouldn't be perfect. Or afraid of people's negative reactions if they didn't do it quite right or different to what other people would expect.

[8 : 56] Afraid of looking foolish. Afraid of loss of control. And so the work of the kingdom is held back by their fears. Now I'm in the second half of my life now.

Well enjoyed. And you would think that as we grow older, as we get into the second half of our life, we would be willing to take more risks.

Now you would think that. That's reasonable, isn't it? After all, we now have more experience. We have some maturity. We should be more confident. Fear of being out of touch.

Fear of diminished energy. Fear of getting too involved and the demands that people might make on us growing too large. Too discomforting.

This of course is a very selfish fear. We become too comfortable in our ordered world. We turn healthy boundaries into barriers against discomforts that might actually grow us and positively grow the kingdom.

[10:09] A group of 90 year olds were surveyed and asked this question. If you had your life over again, what would you do differently?

Their responses were clustered around these three statements. I'd reflect more. Secondly, I'd put my energy into things that last.

And thirdly, I'd risk more. If any of you here today are in the second half, let me read these words to you of the great South American Christian Dom Helder Camira.

Pilgrim, when your ship long moored in harbour gives you the illusion of being a house, when your ship begins to put down roots in the stagnant water by the quay, put out to sea.

Save your boat's journeying soul and your own pilgrim's soul cost what it might. There's a new organisation now called Prime Timers.

[11:30] And many mission agencies are appealing to these people to think about spending two or three years out on the field, giving perhaps a career missionary the chance to come home and have a relief period.

That kind of thing. And people are coming forward to do that. These people are mature, they've got skills, and it's terrific to see people like this rising to this challenge.

Three people from our congregation in recent years have done that in the second half of their life.

Verse 25, I was afraid and went out and hid your talent in the ground.

Is there something that you're afraid of that is causing you to bury your talents, to not develop them? Then face the fear, confront it, and put out to sea again.

Now let's quickly run through the story again as Jesus told it. The kingdom of heaven will be like a man going on a journey who called his servants and entrusted his property to them.

[12:42] To the one he gave five talents of money, to another two, to another one, each according to his ability. Now in my NIV it has a footnote that says a talent is worth more than a thousand dollars.

Now that would be US dollars when the NIV was first printed so we could probably sort of multiply that by a factor of about five now.

The talent originally was a measure of weight but later became a measure of money. In Luke's gospel where we have the parallel parable they're called the ten miners and a miner was three months wages we're told.

Now if you multiply that by ten that's thirty months which is about two and a half years wages. So whatever the exact amount was, the point is Jesus has chosen for his story a large amount of money.

If you think about a peasant listening to this in the first century two and a half years wages is sort of an unimaginable amount of money. so they're given a significant amount of money.

[13:51] Then he goes on his journey and we're told that the man who received the five talents went at once and put his money to work and gained five more and also the one with two gained two more but the man who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money.

Then the master returns after a long time it says. Easy to be lulled into a sense of security while you're waiting for the consummation of the kingdom isn't it?

But there will be a day of accountability. Jesus will return or one day before he returns we will face him and he will say to us Peter show me the money.

What have you done with it? Now the story goes on and the two servants who invested the money and multiplied it are rewarded but the one who out of fear buried it is treated fairly strongly and harshly.

His master replied you wicked lazy servant so you knew that I harvest where I have not sown and gather where I have not scattered seed well then you should have put my money on deposit with the bankers and in the Greek it's the trapezia the sort of the table on which the money changed.

[15:19] In fact if you go to Greece today you'll see that word above the banks in Athens today. So when I returned you would have received it back with interest.

Even you could have even done that but you didn't. take the talent from him and give it to the one who has ten 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 and throw that worthless servant outside.

Now if we put this parable into context the context in which it's placed in Matthew's gospel. It comes towards the end of Jesus' ministry.

The cross is rapidly approaching. In chapter 24 Jesus has been speaking about his second coming in power to judge the world. This is one of three parables clustered together.

All about judgment and the end of history. The ten virgins and their lamps, the separation of the sheep and the goats and this the parable of the talents. And so the emphasis is clear.

[16:31] You know this isn't rocket science. You don't have to be a genius to work this out. The master will return. It may be after a long time but he will return and when he does return there will be a settling of accounts and then the big question will come.

Show me the money. Now traditionally the talents have been interpreted as all those various resources that God has given to each of us in varying degrees.

Our abilities and our gifts both natural and spiritual. All those things that God has allowed us to acquire. Education, knowledge, skills, experience, our material resources, our money, our time and our energy.

and I think that's right. That's the way we should read it. But I want this morning for you to consider another piece of resource that you have been given that isn't always included when we think of the parable of the talents.

And yet it's a piece of resource that God has given to all of us. It's a common piece of resource. Some of us have some abilities and talents, some resources that others don't have.

[17:58] We don't all have the same. But there is one piece of resource that God has given to every one of us in this room this morning who has come to know and trust and love the Lord Jesus Christ.

It's a piece of venture capital if you like that we're all given to grow the kingdom. And it's the most precious piece of all. It's the gospel of grace.

Romans chapter 5 verse 1 Since we have been justified through faith we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand.

faith. Now that's true for all of us who have put our trust in Jesus Christ. Now it's what we do with this gift that I want to focus my concluding remarks this morning.

Now you would think in a gathering like this if I ask you do you promote grace you would say well of course grace. I mean after all I believe with all my heart in God's grace to me in Christ.

[19:14] My life is grounded on that truth. Yes. But do you actually promote it? Does your life promote it?

Does the way you live promote grace? Grace, the free loving acceptance and gift of God to us.

Do your attitudes to others promote grace? Does your behaviour promote grace? Does the way you live and speak and treat other people draw attention to grace or does it undermine it?

Could someone looking at your life and listening to you and the way you speak and behave think I've had an insight into the grace of God or is it the opposite?

Do you bury grace beneath ungracious attitudes, negativity, negativity, being judgmental, critical, having an unforgiving spirit? I read this the other day, this very arresting statement.

[20:31] He who cannot forgive another breaks the bridge over which he himself must pass. Jesus said, pray like this, forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.

all of us must pass over the bridge of forgiveness or we do not cross into God's country. U2 is arguably one of the greatest rock bands in the world.

Recently they released a new CD and among the many songs on it is a hymn to Grace by Bono who's the lead singer and a Christian. Let me quote it to you.

Remember this song will be sung by millions of people. It will be heard by millions of people. Grace, she takes the blame.

She covers the shame, removes the stain. Grace, it's the name for a girl. It's also a thought that changed the world.

[21:48] When she walks on the street, you can hear the strings. grace finds goodness in everything. Grace travels outside of karma.

When she goes to work, you can hear her strings. Grace finds beauty in everything. What once was hurt, what once was friction, what left a mark, no longer stings because grace makes beauty out of ugly things.

I think it's great that that song will be heard by hundreds and thousands of people and maybe subliminally they will get a bit of a taste for the grace of God.

You know, the people of our fractured and confused 21st century society long for grace. The people that you and I live and work among every day are hungry for it.

Now, they may not be able to explain that, to name it, to express it, but they know it when they see it and they know it when they experience it.

[23 : 08] One of the fascinating things about contemporary film is that the theme of redemption and grace is a constant recurring theme. Constantly.

And yet, in spite of this hunger for grace, we so often miss the opportunity. So let's determine to make our lives and our speech more grace-filled.

Let's determine to multiply this grace that we've been given by being more gracious ourselves, more hospitable and more generous, more forgiving, more understanding of other people's brokenness, more willing to tell the story of God's grace to us in Jesus Christ.

grace. We need to go back again and again to our own personal experience of God's grace to us. I can still remember the sweet feeling of knowing that in spite of what I was and what I'd failed to do and what I'd done, that God accepted me just as I was.

I can still feel that. Go back to that experience of grace yourself and remind yourself of what it was like.

[24 : 40] Let's be determined to build churches that are oases of grace and graciousness, where the story of grace can be heard and seen and experienced. Let's be constantly asking ourselves, what undermines grace here and what promotes grace here and what undermines it?

Let's get rid of that. Let's encourage what promotes grace. Let's name and overcome in ourselves the fears that stop us from multiplying God's grace.

let's have a fresh determination to pass on the story of grace. Let me put this question to you. When was the last time you told someone the story of God's grace to them in Christ?

And told it with that sense of excitement that this is the most important truth that anyone could ever hear? Let me close with this story.

Some years ago after the collapse of apartheid in South Africa, there was a great celebration at a huge concert in the UK.

[26 : 06] It was actually in Wembley Stadium in London. And various musical groups, mostly rock bands, had gathered together in celebration of the changes in South Africa.

But for some reason the promoters had also organised the opera singer Jesse Norman as the closing act. Now possibly because Jesse Norman is an Afro-American, but she is a great opera singer and in a somewhat different league to the rest of the bands that had been organised.

Well for 12 hours the concert went on. Groups like Guns and Roses and other heavy metal groups had blasted the crowd through banks of speakers, riling up the fans who were already pretty high on booze and dope.

The crowd yelled for more curtain calls and the rock groups obliged. Eventually the time came for Jesse to sing.

She walked onto the stage alone. Admittedly she is a fairly tall and striking woman, but she had no backup band, nothing. She walked into the centre of the stage and a spotlight focused on her.

[27 : 25] No one of course recognised her. The crowd were restless. Some began to yell for more Guns and Roses. The scene was getting a bit ugly.

And then alone, a cappella, Jesse began to sing. And very slowly she sang, Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me.

I once was lost but now I'm found, was blind but now I see. And a remarkable thing happened in Wembley Stadium that night.

Seventy thousand raucous fans slowly began to fall silent before the aria of grace. By the time Norman reached the second verse, t'was grace that taught my heart to fear and grace my fears relieved, she had them in her hands.

By the time she reaches the third verse, t'is grace that brought me safe thus far and grace will lead me home. Several thousand fans are beginning to sing along, digging far back in nearly lost memories for words they heard long ago.

[28 : 49] One observer said, a power descended on Wembley Stadium that night. The world thirsts for grace. grace. When grace descends, the world falls silent before it.

Don't bury this gift that you've been given. The world is thirsty for grace. Multiply it. Promote it.

Let us pray. we thank you for your great love for us. That you came amongst us in the person of your son Jesus Christ.

That you bore us in. That you showered us with grace. That despite our darkness and our failure, we are now carried in your arms of grace.

Always covered by your grace and your love. Help us to get back in touch with that Lord, so that we may be just so excited about it, so thankful that we will want to promote it and tell everybody about it.

[30 : 19] this world that's hungry for grace. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.