

## The Parable of the Talents

The parable of the talents is very important. It is in both Matthew and Luke, and in both Gospels it is the ultimate parable, the last one before we begin the story of the passion. This is the lesson Jesus particularly wanted to ram into his disciples' heads before he left them. And the point of it is obvious. Jesus is the Master in the story, we are the servants. We are the ones he leaves behind to look after his business while he goes on a journey to a far country. We are the ones who have been given particular talents to use for him until he returns. And we are the ones who are going to be judged according to how we have used them.

I think there are five main points to make about this parable. Here they are.

**1. Everything we have belongs to God and came from him** – literally everything, including the atoms and molecules we are made of. We might tell ourselves that we have earned stuff by our own merit or ingenuity or by the sweat of our brow; but actually, our own merit and ingenuity and our capacity for hard work are all gifts as well. We have nothing, we earn nothing, we are nothing that is not sheer gift from him.

**2. He has given all of us some particular talents.** A ταλαντον in Greek was a weight, usually of silver used for money. It is a very large amount – a talent of silver was about fifteen years' wages for a labourer – so let's say about £300,000 in today's money. But by Jesus' time the word was already used to mean personal gifts in general. What Jesus is talking about in this parable are all the resources, skills, possibilities, abilities, character traits that we've been entrusted with.

And of course the allocation of talents is different to different people, just as different numbers of talents are given to the servants in the parable; but everybody gets something. There is no talentless person. And your gifts are unique to you. There is nobody else in the world who has the same combination of possibilities that you have. God has gifted you for a unique purpose.

**3. God expects us to use our talents to fulfil that purpose.** We are accountable to him for his investment in us, and he expects a return. One day, in this life or the next, there will be an audit. We will be asked 'What did you do with the chances you had?' And we will have to live with the answer.

**4. It is a major sin to bury the potential God has given me.** Why would we do that? It might be laziness, it might be passivity, but usually, as with the man in the Gospel who buried his talent, it is out of fear. And it is an understandable fear. There are members of my family who could have gone to university, or were offered senior jobs, but turned it down because it seemed too scary. It felt safer to stay at home, or to be content with the job they could already do backwards, than to take the risk.

Trying to find and use your talents is always risky. You risk failure, rejection, looking stupid. You have to overcome self-doubt, self-consciousness, and self-pity sometimes too. But if you don't, you risk living with endless regret. Now I have to say I feel instinctively sympathetic to the man who buried his talent. People who bury their talents are often nice, shy, unassuming people. But if it means they fail to do what they were put here for, Jesus is incredibly unsympathetic. The frightened servant who buries his talent is called wicked and lazy and thrown into outer darkness. Which suggests God really, seriously hates wasted lives and wasted resources. If nothing else, this parable should make us pray very hard indeed to know exactly what he wants of us, and make damn sure we at least try to do it.

**5. If you don't use it, you lose it.** The Master says 'Take the talent from the man who buried it and give it to the one who has ten'. It looks unfair, but it isn't. The man was wasting his talent, so he loses it. The same applies to almost anything in life – time, money, effort, energy, or abilities. If you don't use your muscles they waste away. If you don't use your mind you get stupid. If you waste opportunities, they rarely come again. And if you don't use the particular potentials God gave you for the particular purpose of your life, then in the end you lose the whole point of being you.

So there we are. Five points from Jesus' ultimate parable:

1. Everything we have and are is from God
2. He has given us all some particular talents
3. He expects a return on what he's invested in us
4. It is a major sin to waste your potential through fear
5. If you don't use it you lose it, and you risk losing the whole purpose of your life.

And here is a final point. This Chaplaincy has a long and rich history, it is well resourced, and you are a talented congregation. That is not flattery, in fact, in the light of today's parable it is more of a threat. "From those to whom much is given, much is expected." And God has invested an awful lot in us and in this place.

If he is going to get a return on that investment, every single one of us has to ask God seriously and earnestly to show us how he wants us to use the talents he has given us to achieve the particular task he has for us. And if the truth is, we already know deep-down what that is, but have been too scared or self-conscious to do it, then we need to ask him to get that fear out of the way and to get our talent out of the ground and working for him.

So pray hard, and act on it. 'Use it or lose it'.