

Matthew 25: 14-30
Using our Talents
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In Matthew 25:14-30, Jesus tells the story of a man who sets off on a journey, and, in his absence, leaves each of his servants a certain amount of money, “each according to his ability.” When the master finally returns, he praises the servants who used what they were given to make more. But the one who did nothing with his talent is called a “wicked, lazy servant” by the master.

In biblical times, the word “talent” referred to a weight usually about 60 pounds, or 672,500 grains of the Phoenician standard. Depending on whether it’s silver or gold, the value would change accordingly. (Probably about \$1,000 per talent) Yet, it seems fully appropriate to use the term “talents” as “skills” or “gifts” in the interpretive context. Each one of us has talents and abilities, and we are called by God to use these gifts - not to let them sit idle.

So, in light of a Bible Study on this passage, please indulge me as I take a tangent into the world of film...

In the winter of 1981, my grandparents were visiting for the Christmas holidays. As my grandfather was both a lover of track and field and his faith, my family made a trek to the one theatre in Seattle showing an obscure British film with lots of buzz: *Chariots of Fire* (winner of the Academy Award for Best Film in 1982).

The opening scene is a stately church in London, 1978, and a funeral is underway. The eulogy transports us back to the early 1920’s, where young men run along the ocean shore with wind in their faces and the look of bliss and purpose on their faces. Soon we flash back even further, where we are introduced to Harold Abrahams (Ben Cross) and Eric Liddel (Ian Charleson), the main characters in the film.

Harold is a Cambridge University man, with a passion for life, singing, and finding a place in a world filled with prejudice against his Jewish faith. His father was a self-made, Lithuanian Jew who overcame many obstacles. A man Harold complains “forgot one thing. This England of his is Christian, and Anglo Saxon, and so are her corridors of power.” Harold speaks with irritation when discussing his brother, “a doctor, a leader in his field. He wanted for nothing. And here am I. Setting up shop in the finest university in the land.”

Harold knows that the one way he might have access to power not afforded someone of Jewish descent is to win. He is also a talented runner, and anxious to take on the world through his running. His Achilles heel, however, is that his esteem and worth seems linked to whether he wins or loses.

Eric is the child of missionaries to China, and is a man passionate about his faith - as well as his rugby and running. He wrestles with the balance of faith and sport, and whether he should give up sport and serve on the mission field.

“You’re a very lucky man Eric,” his father says. “And the proud possessor of many gifts. And it’s your sacred duty to put them to use.” Later, when hearing that Eric could possibly make the Olympic team, he adds “Eric, you can praise the Lord by peeling a speck if you peel it to perfection. Don’t compromise. Compromise is a language of the devil. Run in God’s name, and let the world stand back in wonder.”

As his running fame increases, he uses the opportunity to talk about his faith; often holding chats after races. In one sermon, he preaches about running the race to perfection. “Jesus said, ‘Behold the kingdom of God is within you. If with all your heart you truly seek me, you shall ever truly find me.’ If you commit yourself to the love of Christ, then that is how you run a straight race.’”

As his training regimen and time commitment increases, his sister Jennie becomes worried that his commitment to his faith and the ministry is fading. He assures her that “I believe that God made me for a purpose. For China. But he also made me fast. And when I run, I feel his pleasure. To give it up would be to hold him in contempt. You were right. It’s not just fun. To win is to honor him.”

Both Harold and Eric are chosen for the 1924 Olympics, and the latter part of the film revolves around their time in Paris. Because of Eric Liddel’s religious convictions, he refuses to run a trial on the Sabbath, and ends up in front of members of the Olympic Committee who try to convince him to change his mind. However, he holds strong to his beliefs, and an alternative is found (he is allowed to run in the 400 instead).

One committee member comments that he’s pleased a settlement had been reached. “His speed is a mere extension of his life, its force. We sought to sever his running from himself.”

This is where the film leads us: to see two extremely talented men driven by very different factors. For Eric Liddel, his faith and his spirit cause him to run. He feels an internal love, one that comes from his faith in God, and his running is a celebration of his gifts. He does not need to win to feel successful. His life is full already. Running is simply something he must do, in order to give life to the person he is, and gifts he possesses.

For Harold Abraham, running and success is what makes his life have meaning. Talking to his friend and classmate Aubrey Montague (Nicholas Farrell), as he prepares for the finals of the 100 yard dash, he says: “I’m 24 and I’ve never

known [contentment]. I'm forever in pursuit, and I don't even know what it is I'm chasing. Aubrey old chap, I'm scared... In one hour's time I'll be out there again. I'll raise my eyes and look down that corridor, 4 feet wide with 10 lonely seconds to justify my own existence. But will I?"

Both Liddel and Abraham win the gold in their respective races, and return home with a heroes welcome. And the remainder of their lives were well lived, as the closing credits reveal:

Harold Abraham became the elder statesman of British athletics and died in January, 1978. Eric Liddel, Missionary, died in occupied China at the end of World War II. All of Scotland mourned.

Three months after viewing this film, I first learned the meaning of the word "crass." I had invited friends to my house to watch a videotape (or was it a Beta?) of *The Blues Brothers* (1980), but because my parents insisted that the content was unfit - "too crass" - for a bunch of young teenagers, we weren't allowed to watch it. Of course, I watched the forbidden fruit shortly thereafter. And a quarter of a century later, the film seems rather tame; but still a great homage to the blues, Chicago, and holy quests.

The opening of *The Blues Brothers* reveals a dark and depressing Joliet city landscape outside, and then the inside of the Joliet prison, then watch as a convict is led through the release process. We have been introduced to Jake Blues (John Belushi). He is met at the gate by a used, beat up Plymouth police car, and is reunited with his brother Elwood (Dan Ackroyd) - who immediately takes him to visit "the Penguin;" the nun who ran the St. Helen's Orphanage where they were raised.

What they find out is that a tax assessment of \$5,000 has been put on the orphanage, and if the money isn't raised, the building will be sold to the Board of Education. Just moments out of prison, Jake announces that he'll go and "get" the money. But when the nun reminds them that she won't accept dirty money, expletives start to fly out of Jake and Elwood's mouths, the ruler-wielding sister chases the brothers down the stairs.

At the bottom of the stairs, they are reacquainted with their friend and mentor Curtis (Cab Calloway), the old caretaker of the orphanage; who ultimately advises them to "get yourself to church." Elwood and Jake are skeptical, and stand awkwardly in the back of the sanctuary of the Triple Rock Church while Reverend Cleophus James (James Brown) leads a rousing service. (The day of the Lord comes like a thief in the night). As the music starts to escalate, people start to dance, and the spirit starts to move, Jake is overwhelmed. The preacher repeats the question, "Do you see the light? Do you see the light?", and as a beam of light shines through the stained glass window, Jake keeps repeating "The Band" as his brother looks on quizzically.

The brothers have had “a God moment,” and they now know what they need to do. They’ll get their band back together, do a few gigs, and then have the \$5,000. God has given them gifts and passions that can be used for good. But as (un)luck would have it, they’re soon pulled over by the police - who learn that Elwood has a suspended license due to 116 parking violations and 56 moving violations.

When the police try to arrest Elwood and impound the vehicle, he turns the ignition, floors the gas pedal, and a chase ensues through streets and a shopping mall. “They’re not going to catch us,” Elwood assures his brother, “We’re on a mission from God.” And although they don’t get caught, they raise the ire of the police force, meaning the mission to reunite the band will include avoiding the law.

The first band members they find are wearing bad candy-colored tuxedos and playing in an empty Holiday Inn lounge as “Murph and the Magitones.” It’s the kind of existence that has them ending each set with the line “Don’t you go changing,” with a wink and a nod. They are miserably bored: they were made to be blues musicians, not a lounge act.

The Blues Brothers discover that other band members have also found new jobs. “Mr. Fabulous” is now the top maitre-d at Chez Paul and “pulling in six bills a week.” And Matt “Guitar” Murphy opened a soul food restaurant with his wife, and took “Blue Lou” with him.

“You’ll never get Matt and Mr. Fabulous out of them high paying gigs,” the brothers are told. “Oh yeah,” Jake says. “Me and the Lord, we’ve got an understanding.” “We’re on a mission from God,” Elwood adds.

Their crazy antics at Chez Paul, and a promise to come back and do the same thing every meal, convince Mr. Fabulous to join them. They then continue to Maxwell Street, where John Lee Hooker plays outside the Soul Food Cafe. Inside, Matt races out of the kitchen when he hears that his bandleaders have arrived. When his wife tries to dissuade him from playing with the band again, Jake asks, “Ma’am, would it make you feel any better if you knew that what we’re asking Matt here to do is a holy thing?” “You see,” Elwood adds, “We’re on a mission from God.”

Despite a heartfelt request from his wife (Aretha Franklin) to “Think” about what he’s trying to do, he leaves with Jake and Elwood and Blue Lou follows behind. There is a resemblance to the passages in Mark’s Gospel where Jesus calls the disciples, and we read that “immediately” they leave their families and follow him.

It is quickly apparent that these men with the “good jobs” miss the life they had before. They were made to make music, and when the opportunity presents itself, they are quick to sign on.

The reunited band heads into Ray’s Music Exchange (Ray Charles) to buy instruments and amplifiers with an I.O.U., and after their first fiasco at Bob’s Country Bunker - where Jake tries to pass them off as the Good Ole Boys, and they drink \$300 worth of beer at a \$200 gig - they decide to go big.

The Blues Brother secure use of the Palace Hotel Ballroom, and then strap a huge speaker to the top of their car and drive all over Chicagoland, and they send kids from the orphanage to canvass all the neighborhoods with signs and posters. Ultimately they pack the house, but will still be short of funds to save St. Helen’s.

Because of all the publicity, however, the authorities hear about the concert and decide to stake out the show. As the concert starts and Jake and Elwood begin their act, all band members have the smiles and vitality of people doing what they’re made to do. While the crowd is skeptical at first, the energy is contagious, and the whole audience is soon singing, cheering and moving with the band.

The brothers leave the set early to avoid the police, but a major record company grabs them and offers them a \$10,000 cash advance for their first recording session. Jake and Elwood ask to keep \$5,000, send \$1,400 to Ray’s Music Exchange, and leave the rest for the band. The brothers then sneak through a trap door while the band continues to play.

It seems as if the whole state police force is after them, not to mention all other disgruntled people they’ve left in their wake. The brothers make it to their car, and prepare for the journey back to Chicago. In this moment, Elwood offers his classic line: “It’s 106 miles to Chicago, we’ve got a full tank of gas, half a pack of cigarettes, it’s dark, and we’re wearing sunglasses.” “Hit it,” is all Jake needs to say. They are one step away from fulfilling their objective.

After the final car chase, which lasts about twelve minutes and sees about 300 cars destroyed, the Blues Brothers end up at the Cook County Assessors Office at Daley Plaza to turn in the \$5,000 and save the orphanage. Their mission from God complete, police and SWAT team members arrive and clamp the handcuffs on Jake and Elwood.

The final scene takes us back to prison, where the Blues Brothers Band plays “Jailhouse Rock” while standing in front of a mural that reads “It’s Never Too Late to Mend.”

The message of our faith is that it's never too late. Yet Jesus uses this parable to remind us that we must live with urgency, using what we have right now. For the servant who buried the money in the ground, the landowner calls him a "worthless, lazy lout!" (Matt. 25:26)

We all have gifts, and we're called to use them. Remember, we're on a mission from God.