



Biblical Stewardship



Bible Study Series

Using Well What God Gives Me - Biblical Background -

MATTHEW 25:14-30

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. Matthew 25:29 NIV

“Okay, students. Let’s look at the OT III syllabus together. You will notice that I expect you to produce handwritten reactions to each of the 493 chapters extending from Job to Malachi. They are due one week before the semester ends. Have fun!” With words like these I begin a new semester of teaching Bible at Hannibal-LaGrange College. I know I’m asking a lot from the students, but I also know that many of them are new Christians and have never read more than a few verses from the Old Testament. They need to know God’s Word, and high expectations almost always produce better results in students’ lives.

Jesus taught us that God also has expectations for people in life. Like good teachers, coaches, bosses and military officers today, our Maker has set high standards for us and He will someday hold us accountable for the choices we make in life. These lessons are driven home for us in the Jesus’ “Parable of the Talents.”

The Historical Setting

It was the day before Jesus’ crucifixion when He spoke this parable. Within 24 hours Jesus would be dead, and He knew it. Consequently, He used this final day of His earthly life to drive home the truths He most wanted His disciples to remember. On His list of top-priority issues was stewardship. So late on Thursday afternoon on the Mount of Olives Jesus gave His most devoted followers the Parable of the Talents.

The Parable

As Jesus told the story, an extremely wealthy man went on a journey. Before leaving, however, he turned a portion of his fortune over to three slaves, money managers, to invest. Each person was given an amount that corresponded to his abilities. One person was given five talents, the staggering equivalent of about 100 years’ of wages for the typical Jewish blue-collar worker in first-century Palestine. The second was given three talents, about 60 years of wages, while the third was given 20 years’ worth of earnings to invest. After a considerable period of time the rich man returned to reclaim his fortune. Calling each slave to account, he found that the first slave had doubled the sum of money given to him. That was a pretty tidy trick, since there was no stock market and Jews were not allowed to charge interest when lending money to fellow Jews.

Of course, the master was ecstatic when he learned that he had gotten back twice as much money from the slave as the already considerable amount he had given him. Since his slave had been “faithful over a few things,” he would be put “in charge of many things” (Matthew 25:21). Likewise, when he learned that the second slave had produced a 100 percent return on the money given to him the master was just as excited. That slave, too, would receive a prestigious advancement in his career because he had been “faithful over a few things.”

Finally the master called the third slave to account. Unlike the two slaves before him, this one had stashed away the resources entrusted to him and had done nothing with them. While he hadn't lost any of his master's treasure, he also had not helped the master's cause. Learning this, the master was furious and labeled the slave "lazy," "good-for-nothing," and "evil" (Matthew 25:26, 30). Then he stripped the slave of what he did have, giving it to the most successful of his money managers. The parable ends with the master ominously throwing the evil slave "into the outer darkness" where "there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matthew 25:30).

Insights from the Parable

Though Jesus spoke of a wealthy man and his slaves, He was really conveying truths about God and people. And what He taught us provides windows into God's view of stewardship. So what does this unusual story from Jesus' lips teach us about stewardship today? Several things:

1. God has given us gifts to use for His purposes.

As people made in God's image, every one of us has been given astonishing gifts. Some are easily overlooked. Like thumbs and speech. Depth perception and memory. Even life itself. Other gifts may take the form of valued physical and mental abilities and talents: musical proficiency, athletic prowess, problem-solving skills for example. Still other gifts from God may be ours simply because we are residents of the United States: formal education, paved roads, a house or apartment with indoor plumbing. All of these are gifts of God, and collectively they are far more valuable than a century's worth of income.

All of us have been empowered by God to do great things. Have you discovered your gifts yet? Explore yourself; try new experiences, and discover the breadth of what God has given you. Count your blessings; make a list of the resources God has placed at your disposal; it may surprise you just how rich God has made you.

But all this wealth of gifts and blessings was given to us for a purpose. In Jesus' story the slaves were the property of their master, and they were entrusted with a portion of their master's wealth. Their master was pleased with them only as they used his wealth in ways that benefited him. In the same way we as

Christians are not our own: we are God's property. God has given us talents and abilities, and everything we do should benefit God's kingdom. Every choice. Every conversation. Every act.

2. God has given us freedom to use our gifts.

The master in Jesus' parable gave the slaves valuable resources and then went away for "a long time" (Matthew 25:19). In doing this he gave each of the slaves a remarkable additional gift—freedom. No standing over the slaves' shoulders scrutinizing and criticizing each thing they did with his property; instead, a license to use a portion of his vast wealth any way they wanted to. It could be risked or rotted, banked or buried—the choice was up to them.

God has given us the same gift that the master in the parable gave his slaves: Freedom. We are free to spend our gifts of time, energy, and money any way we want. Will we use them to hone a personal talent? Help with a family chore? Participate in a church ministry? Perform an act of selfless service to society? The choice is ours. We can do all of these or none of them. We can try to use up everything we've got on ourselves, on others, or on God—or on any combination of these.

Freedom to choose is possible whether we have little or much. As we look over the history of Christianity we see how ordinary people used their freedom in extraordinary ways. A wonderful example of this known to many of us is David Ring. He has much less freedom than most of us. Inflicted with cerebral palsy at birth and hindered with a speech problem, people told him that he would never marry and have children. But he did. They also told him that he would certainly never preach. But he did and does. Not fretting about what he didn't have, he chose to use the resources he *did* have for God. David Ring currently preaches in about 200 churches and religious events a year, and has touched untold thousands of people with the good news of Jesus Christ. Maybe he's even touched yours. David does not have the physical gifts that many of us have, but he chose to use whatever he did have for God and others.

3. God wants us to use our gifts well.

The master in Jesus' parable was delighted when his slaves created huge returns with

what he had entrusted to them. In the same way, God wants each of us to use our gifts well, and He is pleased when we achieve great things for Him. We have the freedom to use what we have in any way we want, but He is most pleased when we use it to achieve great things for Him. Does that mean that God wants all of us to become pastors of churches? No. What it does mean is that God expects us to use our resources in ways that bring about a blessing for God, others, and ourselves. Practically speaking, it could mean that you use your God-given gifts to be a loving at-home mom, or maybe an honest car repairman, or a reliable and skilled factory worker. You could also teach a Sunday School class, do short-term missions work, rake an elderly widow's leaves, or any of a hundred thousand other God-honoring expressions of your interests and abilities.

David, the great king of Israel in the Old Testament, was a skillful shepherd who had shown great courage and skills while protecting his father's flocks. He could have grown up to become a musically talented, well-to-do herdsman in ancient Israel, as his family expected him to. Had he done this, he'd likely have quietly grown old and died obscurely. But when he received God's anointing, he made the choice to follow God's plan. To borrow a phrase from Emeril, he "took it up a notch." Using skills honed by shepherding Jesse's flock, David became a shepherd of Jehovah's flock. Instead of composing songs for the sheep, he composed songs for the Shepherd. Same skills and abilities just used better. And as a result, God's kingdom grew and the world became a better place.

What talents and abilities do you have? Are you willing to take risks with them for God? How can you use the unique combination of talents, abilities, and opportunities that God has given you to honor Him and help others? When we take risks under girded by faith, we experience achievement enabled by love.

4. Our use of these gifts has eternal consequences.

At the conclusion of Jesus' parable, the master rewarded the slaves who used their gifts well. He also punished the slave who did nothing with his gift. The Bible tells us that God will someday ask each of us to give an account of what we have done with the gifts and abilities, opportunities and possessions that He has

placed in our hands.

Our choices matter to God. He responds with joy when we perform well, making full use of our gifts. He also reacts with passionate, righteous anger when valuable lives, each embedded with talent and bright possibilities are wasted. What are you doing with what God has given you?

The Bible teaches us that our present life is the front porch to eternity. The choices we make now will determine what is waiting for us later. When you move into eternity will God greet you with a hearty "Well done!" or condemn you as wicked and lazy? The choice is yours. God has gifted you. Use your gifts well for the glory of God.