

Faith Means Risk
Matthew 25:14-30
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As we're reading through the Bible this year, and as I looked at passages to preach on during these weeks, I was drawn to Matthew's Gospel. I thought we'd dip into this discourse of Jesus in chapters 24 and 25, then move on. But I've felt drawn to all these parables in chapter 25.

This "parable of the talents" is familiar. We usually hear it when we're talking about financial stewardship. I've often preached on it with that in mind. But early in my ministry, I preached on it with a different emphasis from a slightly different perspective. I'm looking at that sermon and updating it for us today.

We were in Denver one time for a conference. While there, we went to the Museum of Nature and Science. We've always enjoyed taking our kids to places like that—and we like them too. We probably got more out of that visit than our kids did. Rachel was very young and Eric was a baby. The Denver museum has an exhibit called "The Hall of Life" that uses a variety of digital and hands-on displays to celebrate human life. There was a section that showed the development of a child in the womb. Another demonstrated how each of our five senses work. There was a life-size model whose internal organs light up when you push a button. That exhibit made me marvel at God's creation—us! What a gift we've been given—life!

Larry Lacour, a professor and preacher in Tulsa, used to say, "You're here with a life on your hands. What are you going to do with it?"

That's some of what Jesus says with this story. But Jesus was even more specific. He was talking to disciples about the kingdom of God. Just before this story is the parable of the bridesmaids that illustrates the need to be watchful and prepared for Jesus' return—and for the challenges, opportunities, and crises between now and then. This story of servants entrusted with their master's wealth helps us see how to be watchful and prepared. It shows how important it is for us to use wisely the time until Jesus returns, to use what God gives us as God expects us to.

What are we doing, what are we going to do with the great gifts and opportunities God gives us?

Jesus says the kingdom will be like a man going away for a long time and leaving his servants in charge of his wealth. There are three servants in this story. One receives five talents, another receives two talents, and the third receives one talent of money.

Our English word "talent" comes from this parable, but the way we use it is different from how it was used in Jesus' day. We use the word talent to talk about natural abilities. The word originally referred to a measure of weight. Later, it came to mean an amount of silver or gold. One talent was worth fifteen to twenty years of a day laborer's wage. The New International Version translates it as "bag of gold." Other translations keep the word "talent" or use a monetary amount.

The man entrusts one servant with five talents or bags of gold, another with two, and the third with one. This speaks of whatever God entrusts to us. Jesus is talking to his disciples. I wonder if he still has in mind the scribes and Pharisees he addressed just a little earlier. The leaders of the Jewish people had been given the law of Moses. They'd been given the Temple, which was the sign of God's presence among them. They'd been given wonderful promises about how God would bless Israel and bless the world through Israel. But they buried their "talent" in the ground. They had been called to be the light of the world, but they turned that call into encouragement to keep the light for themselves (N. T. Wright, *Matthew for Everyone*).

Jesus' words spoke to the people around him and the situation at that time. But Jesus' words speak to us as well. When we hear this parable, we can think about whatever God has entrusted to us: life, new life in Christ and all the privileges, responsibilities, and opportunities that go with it.

The man in the parable gave to each servant *according to his ability*. Another exhibit we saw at the Museum of Nature and Science all those years ago demonstrated various scientific principles. Each one was related to some comic-book superheroes and their particular powers like Superman's x-ray vision, the Flash's speed, and so forth. I read a lot of comic books as a kid, so I appreciated that.

Those superheroes have different powers and abilities. Spiderman can do things Batman can't. Wonder Woman deflects bullets with her wristbands and has a "lasso of truth" that makes people tell the truth. The Flash can run extremely fast. Superman may be unique—he has a combination of many powers.

We don't have to be Superman—able to do everything—to be effective for God. We don't all have equal abilities, but each of us is given opportunity according to our ability. And every one of us has ability and opportunity. There's not one of us that God hasn't entrusted with responsibility. There's not one of us that God won't hold accountable for our life and service in God's kingdom.

While their master was gone, the five-talent servant and the two-talent servant *went at once*, put the money to work and gained more. They planned, they worked, they invested and they doubled their master's money.

But the one-talent servant went off, dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money. Burying money to protect it was fairly common in those days. It was safe and prudent and the servant didn't risk losing his master's money.

Finally, the master returns and settles accounts with the servants. the five-talent servant says, "Master, you entrusted me with five talents. See, I have gained five more."

The master replies, "Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness! Let's celebrate together!"

The two-talent servant, though he had less to begin with and produced less, still was faithful with what he had been given. He receives just the same reward as the five-talent servant: affirmation, more responsibility, and joy—celebrating with the master.

Then the one-talent servant starts making excuses. He thought he knew the master's character and he was afraid so he hid the master's money and now gives it back to him.

The master chastises this servant for being wicked and lazy. He tells him he should have at least put the money in a bank to draw some interest.

Then the talent is taken from the one-talent servant and given to the ten-talent servant.

Faithfulness grows and receives more responsibility. Faithlessness loses what opportunity it has.

Not only that, but this third servant is denounced as worthless. He doesn't share the master's joy. Instead, he's tossed out into the darkness to grieve and mourn his lost opportunity.

Now if we're wise, we want to be like the first two servants and not like the last one. We want to be faithful disciples whose faithfulness leads to being affirmed by our Lord, receiving even greater opportunity and responsibility, and ever-increasing joy. We don't want to be unfaithful disciples who squander our opportunity and lose it and so miss out on our Lord's joy.

What makes the difference? The contrast between the first two servants and the third shows that the first two were willing to risk while the third was paralyzed with fear.

A willingness to risk is a sign of faith and a sign of life. Life is always growing, developing, moving out to something new. What if explorers didn't risk going to new places? What if inventors didn't risk failure in their experiments?

A man was in a park watching squirrels jump from limb to limb and from tree to tree, risking great falls. An older man nearby said, "I guess they have to risk it if they don't want to spend their lives in one tree" (James S. Hewett, ed., *Illustrations Unlimited* 129).

I once heard another pastor say that the contemporary word for faith is *risk*. The Holy Spirit isn't satisfied with the *status quo*, the way things are. This pastor went on to say that the church's resources should be gambled, not managed and conserved. We need to invest, risk, and give.

When I heard that, I thought about being in high school football practice, saving my energy and effort so I could make it through practice. Not really going all out and giving it everything. I wonder what I missed, what I could have achieved, what resources I may have had that I didn't know about. I didn't find out, because I was conserving what little I thought I had.

What resources and opportunities has God given us? And what are we doing with them? We have this land, this great building. It gets a lot of attention. People in the community compliment it. But we're not called just to have a nice building. We're called to use it for ministry, to make it a base of operations for going into the surrounding area with good news and loving service. People who make up the church may be our greatest resource. And our relationships provide our greatest opportunities. Our congregation is full of bright, talented, faithful people. All of us together are a great resource for doing God's will in this community.

What has God entrusted to you? What abilities, what natural talents, what spiritual gifts? What connections do you have in the community? What are you passionate about? What opportunities do you have? As followers of Jesus, we all have the power of the Holy Spirit. We have the good news of God in Jesus Christ. We have the call to serve and bless others. What are we doing with what God gives us?

Faithful risk-takers pray something like, "God, I'm willing for you to do whatever you want and I'm willing to do whatever you want me to do."

Sometimes we want to be like that. Other times, we're risk-averse, we avoid it. What holds us back, what keeps us from that kind of risk? It's what led the one-talent servant to bury his talent—fear. "I was afraid and went out and hid your gold in the ground" (v 25).

A stranger stopped by a farmhouse and asked the farmer, "How's your cotton?"

"Didn't plant none. 'Fraid of the boll weevil."

"How's your corn?"

"Didn't plant none. 'Fraid of drought."

"How are your potatoes?"

"Didn't plant none. 'Fraid of tater bugs."

"Well, what did you plant?"

"Nothin'. I just played it safe." (*Illustrations Unlimited* 204-05)

If he keeps playing it safe, he'll never have a crop—and he won't have a farm much longer.

How many things does fear keep us from trying? What kinds of fears hinder us? How do we echo the one-talent servant?

I would have given my life to Christ, but I was afraid.
I would have brought my friend to church, but I was afraid.
I would have witnessed, but I was afraid.
I would have given my best, but I was afraid.
We would have been a growing church, but we were afraid.
We would have been bold in our community, but we were afraid.

A circus elephant was tied to an 18" stake. You can tell this is an old story—one of the country's big circuses recently quit using elephants. Anyway, this big elephant was tied to this little stake. He could have pulled it from the ground and been free, but he had tried it when he was a baby and couldn't. The elephant concluded that he could never pull it from the ground. There stood this massive, strong creature, capable of lifting whole trees, held captive by a puny stake in the ground (Michael P. Green, ed., *Illustrations for Biblical Preaching* 136).

What small stake, what fear could you be released from if you renewed your faith in Jesus and received fresh power from the Holy Spirit? Childish fears, fears of failure, fears of not having what it takes often hold us back. Like when I was in football practice—we don't dare give it all because we're afraid we won't make it.

God wants to set us free from those fears. God wants to empower us with the Holy Spirit to be bold, daring, risk-taking people of the kingdom. God gives us abundant resources. Even one talent was more than a worker could earn in fifteen years. What an illustration of God's generosity. God gives us responsibility according to our ability. God knows what we're capable of. And, God knows what we're capable of when we're in partnership with him, when we rely on him, his grace and power.

We can overcome our fears with God's help. Someone once shared some practical steps for overcoming fear.

Mentally face the worst possibility. Look that fear in the face.

Consider the experience of others and be encouraged.

Make a choice and act. Move out in obedience to God. It may be a baby step, a small beginning. A bridge needed to be built across a gorge. How do you start something like that? Someone shot an arrow carrying a

string from one side to the other. A connection was established. The string was used to draw a piece of twine across. The twine then carried a small rope. The rope soon carried a cable across. Eventually came the iron chains the bridge was to hang from (*Illustrations for Biblical Preaching* 136).

Let's help each other take steps of obedience to God. Let's not allow each other to bury our talents, but let's help each other take bold risks in the name of our great God who took great risks to create us, to relate to us, to save us. Our great God came to us in Jesus and he went into the outer darkness for us. He allowed himself to die and be buried like a seed. Then he burst forth with new life for everyone who will trust him. That's the God we trust, who goes before us and with us in every challenge, every opportunity, every risk for the sake of God's kingdom.