

Stewardship: Blessing Others on Matthew 25:14-46

By Rev. Russell B. Smith

Covenant-First Presbyterian Church
717 Elm Street, Cincinnati, OH 45202

This week we are looking at Matthew 25. This may seem like a strange passage to use in the context of stewardship — it's about judgment. Don't worry. I'm not going to tell you that if you don't give to the church you're going to burn. What this passage talks about, though, is our attitudes about stewardship, particularly our attitudes about the 90% of our income that we are responsible to manage for God.

This passage takes place during Jesus' last week of earthly ministry. Palm Sunday has happened — Jesus has proceeded into Jerusalem, has tossed out all the moneychangers from the temple, and has taught day after day, leading up to the feast of the Passover. Chapters 21-25 of Matthew comprise some of the toughest teaching recorded in the gospels. The chapter immediately preceding deals with the signs of the end of the age, and then chapter 25 begins with parables about what the coming of the end of the age will be like. The parable of the talents in verses 14-46 is a parable of judgment.

First, take a look at the parable of the talents. Notice a few things. First of all, the master gives to each according to his ability. This is a profound truth. So many people spend time fretting over what they don't have that they miss out on what they do have. God gives you resources that match your current abilities, and he expects you to use and develop those resources as best you can. Romans 12, which I keep going back to again and again, makes this point from a different angle: "Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you" (Rom. 12:3). And later in Romans 12: "We each have different gifts, according to the grace given us" (Rom. 12:6). And then again in Ephesians 4:7: "But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it." God measures out and parcels out different gifts and different abilities in different measures. One of our main problems is that we spend so much time fretting about why we aren't where we want to be rather than focusing on making the most of where we are.

The grass is always greener. When we have the low paying job, we long for the high paying job; when we have the high paying job, we long for the less demanding job. When we're single we long for the companionship of marriage,

and when we're married we long for the freedom from commitments. When we're anonymous we long to be recognized, when we're recognized we long to be free from the high expectations and criticisms that come. When we're lonely we long to be connected with people, when we're in relationships we long for peace from the inevitable turbulence that comes from different people with different ideas rubbing shoulders.

Do you see how it goes? We're perpetually tempted to be dissatisfied with our present circumstances by minimizing the current blessing and focusing on the current difficulty. And when we look at the other more tantalizing situation, we maximize the imagined blessing and minimize the potential difficulties. The point being this: don't disparage your current gifts, abilities, and skills. God has given you your unique measure of gifts and graces. He designed it for you because he knows what you can and can't handle.

I really love the Dreamworks' film *King of Dreams*. It is the retelling of the story of the patriarch Joseph — not Jesus' father, but the much earlier Joseph, son of Jacob, son of Isaac, son of Abraham. The story of Joseph is told in Genesis 37-50. But the film is a great introduction, even though it is a cartoon. Joseph is betrayed by his brothers and sold into slavery. While a slave in Egypt, he blessed his master's house and became the chief steward of the whole household. But Joseph is again betrayed, and this time is thrown into prison where he waits for years and years. The Bible tells us that even in prison, Joseph made the best of his situation, and soon the warden saw his ability and honesty and put him in charge of all the people in prison. I love how the film captures the scene though: For the sake of brevity and moving the story along, it shows Joseph simply caring for a small weed growing in his cell. As the days go by, he captures water and binds up the stem of the plant so that it can grow. He builds a retainer of soil around it and nurtures it. By the time the guards come to release him from captivity, Joseph has nurtured the small plant into a flowering tree. The point being this: God doesn't want you to waste your life longing for something different. God wants you to make the most out of what you have now — today.

The next part of this parable shows that an expectation is placed on the servants. The expectation isn't equal for each; just as each is given according to his ability, it appears as though the expectation is weighted based on ability. But don't miss this: there is an expectation of some kind of return. The servant who brought nothing in return is condemned.

Now, a quick note is necessary here. Remember that we always let Scripture be our guide in interpreting Scripture — we have to read Scripture in light of what other Scripture says. This passage does not teach that we have to earn our salvation and standing with God. Remember Ephesians 2:8-9: "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith — and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God — not by works, so that no one can boast." We don't do anything to earn God's grace toward us. However, we can and should expect that God's

grace will begin to produce an effect within us. In other words we should see some evidence of God's grace.

That's what's going on here. The man who received the one talent showed nothing. He is like the person who claims to be a Christian, but who has no evidence of progression or change in his or her life. People like this may check their time off in church, perhaps do a few good deeds each week, and maybe even read a little Bible if they really want to get in good with God. Let me warn you: this is not a good way. Jesus desires that we bear fruit, not just the fruit of the spirit listed in Galatians 5 (love, joy, peace, patience, gentleness, kindness, goodness, and self-control), but also fruit that comes from Godly living, fruit that comes from being good. Now, don't think this means that God expects you to be perfect in this life. Not at all. My friend and mentor Steve Brown is fond of saying, "I'm not perfect, but I'm better than I was last year, and I'm only better because of the grace of Jesus Christ given to me."

The other part of the passage is the story of the sheep and the goats. This tells us the kind of fruit Jesus has in mind in this particular section. Here he talks about the judgment at the end of the ages as a separation. And notice the criterion on which people are separated: being a blessing to others, particularly those who are weak:

I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me (Matt. 25:35-36).

These are all positive actions taken. Again, these actions are not the foundation of salvation; they are the fruit, the result. You see, when Jesus said he came that we might have life and have it abundantly, this is what he meant: the life of giving yourselves away to those around you, particularly to the weak. It is a life of blessing others. Now, that will mean different things at different times — remember the parable of the talents.

I know some who give away their professional services to those who cannot afford to pay. Others give time and money to worthwhile causes. Many do this through church groups and programs that provide for the poor and underprivileged. Many do this person to person, perhaps offering help in a particular acute crisis. The point is to be a blessing to those who are in need.

A caveat here (not mentioned in Scripture, but worth bringing up): when you are the one in need, receive the blessing with graciousness. Again, God has put you in a particular situation, not to refuse help and show you can go it alone, but to learn dependence and graciousness.

In closing, I'll remind you of the great book *Tuesdays with Morrie*, Mitch Ablom's conversations with his mentor who was slowly dying. Morrie Schwartz said this,

"So many people walk around with a meaningless life. They seem half-asleep, even when they're busy doing things they think are important. This is because they're chasing the wrong things. The way you get meaning into your life is to devote yourself to loving others, devote yourself to your community around you, and devote yourself to creating something that gives you purpose and meaning."¹

One of my favorite stories, though, was when Morrie worked as an intern in a psychiatric hospital:

"One of the patients, a middle-aged woman, came out of her room every day and lay facedown on the tile floor, stayed there for hours, as doctors and nurses stepped around her. Morrie watched in horror. He took notes, which is what he was there to do. Every day, she did the same thing: came out in the morning, lay on the floor, stayed there until the evening, talking to no one, ignored by everyone. It saddened Morrie. He began to sit on the floor with her, even lay down alongside her, trying to draw her out of her misery. Eventually he got her to sit up, and even to return to her room. What she mostly wanted, he learned, was the same thing many people want — someone to notice she was there."²

You think about that. Amen

¹ Ablom, Mitch. *Tuesdays with Morrie* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 42-43.

² Ibid. 109-110.