

The Parable of the Talents - Matthew 25; 14-30

Let's talk strap lines or mission statements! These days most businesses, clubs, groups have their own strap line or mission statement, don't they? Do any of these ring any bells? Be Prepared; Just Do it; Because you're worth it, even the burger chain Wendy's has the strapline - where's the beef? - had to put that one in! and here's a really good one - "Loving God, Sharing Christ, Serving One Another" - sound familiar?

Looking at the parable of the talents that Jesus tells in Matthews gospel, I think a good strapline would be "Be pro-active, Be productive, Be prepared" or in other words "Don't be lazy, Don't bury your head in the sand, don't leave it too late". What is Jesus preparing his disciples for here? It is important to realise where in the gospel this parable sits - it is towards the end and as we know, the gospel ends with the crucifixion, the resurrection of Jesus and then the great commission that he gives to his disciples to go and make more disciples. Jesus must surely have been using this parable (along with others) to tell the disciples about the Kingdom of heaven and what they should do to proclaim that Kingdom.

Jesus begins the parable by saying in verse 14 "For it will be like a man going on a journey" - and let's remember that Jesus himself will be going on a journey - he will be leaving his disciples behind after his resurrection and subsequent ascension into heaven. He will tell them that he is to return but they and he do not know when, so in the meantime they are to be prepared, to be proactive in their own discipleship and in spreading the gospel message.

Lets go through the parable and imagine the master as Jesus, the servants as ourselves and the talents, not necessarily as anything of monetary value as is probably meant here, but rather as all that God has given us in terms of abilities, character and of course grace.

So, the master begins by handing out the talents - five to one servant, two to the next and one to a third. This was done we are told according to the abilities of each servant. We must remember here that God knows us deeply and will only

expect of us what he knows we are capable of. But and this is a big but, he does expect us to do something! As we see from the parable, the first servant, the one with five talents goes and makes five more talents, thereby doubling what he was given. The second servant does likewise, he makes four talents from his original two. However, the third servant, being rather afraid of the master, did nothing with his one talent and instead buried it, knowing that at least he'd be able to return that one talent to his master on his return. So to put this into context for us, our master, Jesus, before his ascension into heaven, explained to his disciples that he was going away to be with our Father in heaven but that he would return and that in the meantime those first disciples and then we today should proclaim the Kingdom of heaven and be fruitful in our discipleship using the many gifts, talents and abilities that our Lord God has given us.

Again, let's remember that we are only expected to do what God knows we are capable of and he provides for us on that basis - remember in Luke's Gospel when in Chapter 22 the Disciples ask Jesus who is the greatest? And Jesus replies in v 26 "let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves" and then in verse 28-30 "You are those who have stayed with me in my trials, and I assign to you, as my Father assigned to me, a kingdom, that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom". We are all servants of God, along with Jesus, and as such must be fruitful and faithful to him. But still, God doesn't expect us to carry out these things in our own strength. Knowing our weaknesses, he gives us the additional gift of his Holy Spirit through whom we may be strengthened and emboldened to go out and do what God has set for us to achieve. Hierarchy, wealth etc don't feature in the life of a Christian. As our earlier hymn says "seek ye first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you". In other words if we have faith in and trust God we will be given his free gift of grace and seen as righteous, assuring us of our own place in his Kingdom but we will also be provided with all that we need to be his disciple and share the good news with others.

Now we come to the part of the story where the master returns. The first two servants are able to report to their master that they have doubled what was given

to them and as such the master says to them “well done good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master”. So, you see although one servant was giving back less than the other, the important thing is that each had used what he had been given wisely and had produced more from his efforts. It didn’t matter that the amount given back was a different amount, just that it was the result of good stewardship of the original amount. And isn’t that what we are called to be - good stewards of God’s Kingdom until he returns?

Now the master’s response to what the third servant had done - remember, he’d just buried his talent and done nothing with it. “You wicked and slothful servant. You know that I reap where I have not sown and gather where I scattered no seed. Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers and at my coming I should have received what was my own with interest. So, take the talent from him and give it to him who has the ten talents”. I’m sure you’d agree that this is not the encounter we want to have with Jesus on his return. As Christians we must acknowledge that all that we have is God-given and should be used to his glory. We must all play our part in spreading the good news of Jesus Christ and his Kingdom. In Ecclesiastes chapter 5 verse 15 it says

“As he came from his mother’s womb he shall go again, naked as he came, and shall take nothing for his toil that he may carry away in his hand.” A real reminder that we owe everything to God and that all that we have is by his grace.

A further reminder of this is found in 1 Corinthians chapter 4 verse 7 where Paul says “For who sees anything different in you? What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?”. We are changed or transformed by God’s grace and his gifts to us - we owe everything to Him.

Our parable ends with the message that “to everyone who has, will more be given, and he will have an abundance. But from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. And cast the worthless servant into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth”. What a stark outlook for

us if we don't fulfil our discipleship responsibilities. To quote theologian R C Sproul "Jesus is saying that wisdom and diligence with what he leaves us to manage in his absence is how we will be judged by him on his return". In other words, as we are living in the time between the times, that is the time between Jesus' first appearance on earth and his return, we must be good stewards of his Kingdom. We must remember as Paul reminds us in Ephesians chapter 2 verse 5 that "by grace you have been saved" in other words it is through faith in Christ rather than through good works that we earn our place in heaven and it is this fact that should spur us on to do what we can with what we have. God is not expecting us to bankrupt ourselves, make ourselves homeless or starve ourselves of all food and possessions. No, he is expecting us to do what we can. This may be any number of things, for some a smaller thing like offering friendship and hospitality, than for another who may be able to offer financial support, but neither is greater than the other. Each is done according to our means. But all that we do should be done with Jesus in mind, by living our lives trusting in him and endeavouring to be more and more like him.

Remember the strap lines and mission statements I mentioned at the beginning of this talk? We also see lots and lots of acronyms these days, don't we? LOL, BRB, AWOL for example. When I was doing Real Life, some of the younger candidates had wrist bands with WWJD written on them. When asked, they told me that this stood for What Would Jesus Do? Maybe that would be a good acronym for us to have pinned up somewhere to remind us who to look to when we're not sure of what we should be doing and how.

Before I finish, I'd like to quote a piece that was found on the wall in Mother Teresa's Children's home in Calcutta. It's entitled "Do it anyway" and goes like this:

"People are often unreasonable, irrational, and self-centred. Forgive them anyway.

If you are kind, people may accuse you of selfish, ulterior motives. Be kind anyway.

If you are successful, you will win some unfaithful friends and some genuine enemies. Succeed anyway.

If you are honest and sincere people may deceive you. Be honest and sincere anyway.

What you spend years creating, others could destroy overnight. Create anyway.

If you find serenity and happiness, some may be jealous. Be happy anyway.

The good you do today, will often be forgotten. Do good anyway.

Give the best you have, and it will never be enough. Give your best anyway.

In the final analysis, it is between you and God. It was never between you and them anyway”.

By following this example, we could go a long way to proclaiming God’s Kingdom to others.

And so, if we want to hear those words “well done good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little. I will set you over much; Enter into the joy of your master” are we prepared to adopt the strapline “Be Pro-active, Be Productive, Be Prepared”.

Amen