

GOOD AND FAITHFUL SERVANTS

A SERMON FOR ORDINARY TIME
SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 16, 2014
FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
MARIANNA, FLORIDA
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MATTHEW 25:14-30

This is the second in our three parables in Matthew 25, and it is a familiar one as well, and contains those words that we all hope to hear when we reach the end of our life's toil, and stand face to face with our master: "Well done, thou good and faithful servant."

Old William Barclay came at this parable from another angle. He felt that the original point of the parable, which we often skim over, had to do with the useless servant, the one who only received one talent.

Now let me remind that in the time of Christ, the talent was a unit of measure, of weight, that became associated with gold, or silver, and thus became a unit of currency. It is suggested that the talent in this parable equates to a thousand dollars. So, each of the servants was given a sum of money. The modern term "talent" as a gift or ability or capability, is said to derive from this parable by the way.

But what does Barclay have to say about the useless servant? The one who received only one talent?

He states:

"There can be little doubt that the useless servant stands for the Scribes and the Pharisees, and for their attitude to the Law and the truth of God. The useless servant took and buried his talent in the ground, in order that he might hand it back to his master exactly as it was. The whole aim of the Scribes and Pharisees was to keep the Law exactly as it was. In their own phrase, they sought "to build a fence around the Law." Any change, any development, any alteration, anything new was to them anathema. Their method involved the paralysis of religious truth, and the hatred of everything that was new. Like the man with the talent, they desired to keep things exactly as they were—and it is for that that they are condemned. In this parable Jesus tells us that there can be no religion without adventure, and that God can find no use for the shut mind. But there is much more to the parable than that."

The Gospel of Matthew, Volume 2, pages 356-357.

The first point is that God gives each one differing gifts. In the parable, one man received five talents, another two, another one. In life, each of us have different gifts, some many, some few, some only one. All of those gifts, those talents, are to be used to the glory of God and in service in God's kingdom.

Another point is that the reward for work well done is more work to do. Barclay points out that: "The two servants who had done well are not told to lean back and to rest...because they have done well. They are given greater tasks and greater responsibility in the work of the master. The reward of work is not rest, but more work." *Ibid.*, p.357

A third point is that the man who is punished is the man who did not try, who will not try, who will not risk.

The one talent man is the one who often feels that his contribution is so small that it does not matter, who is embarrassed by those with a wealth of talents, and so he hides the one that he has.

Remember the warning of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount? "No one lights a lamp, and hides it under a bushel basket, but puts it on a lamp stand so it can give light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven." Matthew 5:15-16 (NRSV/TWL)

The one talent man who buries his talent is literally hiding his light under a bushel. And by so doing, obscures the glory of God, when we are called to glorify God.

Finally, Barclay says that the fourth point of the parable is that it tells us that to those who have, more will be given, and to those who do not have, even that which they have will be taken away.

This seems harsh. It seems unfair. But remember, we're talking about talents, abilities, capabilities here. It is the basic principle of "use it or lose it."

If someone has a talent, and exercises it, develops it, uses it, that person is able to do progressively more with it. But if one has a talent, and fails to use it, to exercise it, to develop it, it will inevitably be lost. I've lost what little ability I had in the foreign languages and the classical languages I've studied, because I have not used them. I've lost the ability I had to play two or three musical instruments, because I haven't touched one in fifty years. I was looking at my biceps the other day. I haven't been to the gym in months. And my arms are flabby, withered, loose skin hanging that used to be filled with muscle. I haven't used it, so I've lost it.

Barclay contends that the only way to keep a gift is to use it in the service of God and in the service of humanity. And he is right. Use it or lose it is a law of nature, and a law of God.

Barclay writes: "That is equally true of playing golf or playing the piano, of singing songs or writing sermons, of carving wood or thinking out ideas." *Ibid.*, p. 358

So don't bury your talents: risk using them to the glory of God. Don't hide your light under a bushel: let it shine for all to see, that they may give God the glory. And use it or lose it: the more you do, the more you'll get, and the less you do, the more will be taken away.

And for those who do nothing with their talents, with their gifts, the warning is clear, and the danger is present. But for those who try, who risk, who do, the reward is the words of the Master: "well done, good and faithful servant...enter into the joy of your master."

Let us pray.

Lord, when we come to the end of our labors on this earth, may we hear your "Well done..." Amen and amen.