



4 Relationships That Will Change Your Life

Pastor Derek Sanford

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Relationship #3 – You to the Church: Investment

People have different views of the church depending on their background and experience with churches. There are some of you in this room who have had a stale and tasteless experience with the church, and some who have been offended or disappointed in the church at some point in your past. But I want to tell you at the outset that I believe in the power and potential of the church. I believe that Christ has left tremendous responsibility in the hands of local churches just like this one. And I believe that the church is the hope of the world. God knows how to make churches. He places just the right people at just the right time in just the right local church so that that particular church can achieve God's dream for the community. This means that you are here for a reason. If you call Grace your church home, there is a reason that you are here and it's not to be a spectator! You are here to be a participant in our mission as a church and there is a place for you.

Our text today comes from Matthew chapter 25 and it is about this whole concept of fully participating in every opportunity that God brings our way to be a part of the advancement of his Kingdom on this earth. It is commonly known as the "Parable of the Talents." I want to take a close look at this parable today and what it means for us as servants of Christ and gifted members of the local church. The story starts this way.

14"Again, it will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted his property to them. 15To one he gave five talents of money, to another two talents, and to another one talent, each according to his ability. Then he went on his journey.

Matthew 25:14-30

You need to know right now that the application that I would like to draw from this story today is not a financial application. I'm talking about a different kind of investment today. I want to draw a narrow application on spiritual gifts and opportunities to serve in and through the church. It is important at the outset to just tell you that every servant gets a gift. If you are in the room and you are breathing and you are a Christ follower – you have a gift – no exceptions. Notice in the story that there are no "no talent" servants. If you are not yet a Christ follower – God has given you skills and abilities but you will only receive a spiritual gift when you become a servant of the master.

The Story

It's important for us to catch the context of this parable. This story immediately follows the parable of "The Wise and Foolish Virgins," (Mt 25:1-13) where we read of a bridegroom who has left and will be returning soon. The virgins are urged to be ready for the return of the bridegroom. This story is also about a master who has left and will be returning soon, but we are given a glimpse in the Parable of the Talents of what "readiness" looks like.

While both parables relate to the kingdom of heaven, and especially in anticipation of the Lord's return, the first stresses the need to be "prepared"; the latter shows that to be prepared is to be "productive." The first emphasizes "watching" for the Lord, and the second suggests that while we are watching we must also be "working" for the Lord.

This particular story is the story of three servants who represent you and me. These servants are given the chance of a lifetime. Their Master leaves and will be gone for a long time, but before he leaves, he entrusts these three servants with his estate. There is not only a transfer of money, but also a transfer of authority to these servants.

The servants weren't entitled to these gifts, but the master saw fit to leave them with this responsibility. They probably didn't deserve a shot like this, but this story is a clear picture of the generosity of the Lord of the Gift. These were large amounts of money that the servants were left with. It is estimated that one talent was equivalent to 15 years worth of wages. That means each talent was worth somewhere between \$225,000 and \$500,000. That is a staggering amount of money. But the master gives it and goes away. And at some point after the master left, it must have dawned on them that this was a once in a lifetime opportunity.

It's also interesting to note that the master gave to them "according to their ability." This shows wisdom and love and discernment on the part of master. It also shows the diversity of the servants.

And so the Lord of the gift has given them the chance of a lifetime and they have a decision to make. They can exercise initiative, rise to greater positions, what an amazing opportunity! What will they do? They have reached a defining moment, and this paints a great picture for Christ Followers to this day. Some of you are at a similar crossroads. You have become a follower of Jesus, but it seems like you're stuck. I'm proposing that the next step for you may be to invest yourself into the work of the kingdom. In this story two of the servants proved faithful and one proved unfaithful – and by the end of the story it is very clear which side of that line you're going to want to be on.

3 Marks of Faithful Servants

16The man who had received the five talents went at once and put his money to work and gained five more. 17So also, the one with the two talents gained two more. 18But the man who had received the one talent went off, dug a hole in the ground, and hid his master's money. 19After a long time the master of those servants returned and settled accounts with them.

1. They choose urgency over apathy

A US Army officer tells the story about his instruction at an artillery training school in Oklahoma. In 1958 he taught a course in artillery training in which he couldn't keep students awake. In 1965 with the exact same lectures at the exact same school, students were glued to his teaching hanging on every word. They were taking meticulous notes. Do you know what the difference was? We were in the middle of the Vietnam war and those students in 1965 knew that in a few short weeks they would be staring across a field at people who were trying to kill them. Suddenly the subject matter took on a whole new sense of urgency.

In our story, the first two slaves "went off at once." They didn't know when master might return, but they knew their assignment and they lived with a sense of urgency, so they immediately went to work. The third slave apathetically dug a hole and buried his talent. I wonder what motivated him. At the end of the story we find out that he was afraid of the master and afraid of investing his talent, so he chose to do nothing with it. And it's interesting to note that his talent wasn't misused, but unused.

If I'm apathetic about the talents God has given me, I may discount and bury the irreplaceable treasure that the lord of the gift has given only to me. So I must identify and cultivate, invest in, prize, celebrate the gifts He's given to me and you because the Lord of the Gift is very wise. He entrusted you with everything you need to fulfill your purpose. Use your gifts with urgency – don't bury them – because the Lord of the Gift is coming back.

And as this passage says, he is coming to "settle accounts." We would be a lot better off if we reminded ourselves on a regular basis that God is going to settle accounts with us. We must serve with a sense of urgency. A sense of not knowing how much time we have remaining.

2. They choose risk over inactivity

20The man who had received the five talents brought the other five. 'Master,' he said, 'you entrusted me with five talents. See, I have gained five more.' 21'His master replied, '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!'

22"The man with the two talents also came. 'Master,' he said, 'you entrusted me with two talents; see, I have gained two more.' 23"His master replied, '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!'

24"Then the man who had received the one talent came. 'Master,' he said, 'I knew that you are a hard man, harvesting where you have not sown and gathering where you have not scattered seed. 25So I was afraid and went out and hid your talent in the ground. See, here is what belongs to you.' 26"His master replied, 'You wicked, lazy servant! So you knew that I harvest where I have not sown and gather where I have not scattered seed? 27Well then, you should have put my money on deposit with the bankers, so that when I returned I would have received it back with interest.'

So the master comes back and he really measures the success of the servants based upon the risk that they assumed on his behalf. Two of the servants come with boldness. Notice that they acknowledge the master as giver of talents. The first servant says, "You gave me 5 talents." They never made the mistake of assuming that the talents were their own. And also notice that although the five talent servant and the two talent servant yielded different results, Jesus pictures them as equal in their faithfulness. Even though the amounts were different, the risk was equal.

I've always noticed two things that are missing in this story. The first thing missing is the middle of the story. We get the beginning and ending. But I want to hear about the times when faithful slaves walked right up to the edge, to the point where they thought they had lost it all. You only double your money in a short amount of time if you take some pretty significant risks. I want to hear about the times that they were sweating, the times when they experienced the fear and frustration of having everything on the table. I want to know about the middle of the story, but I can imagine.

The second thing that's missing is a character. Notice that there is no character that risks it all and loses it all. I think this character is left out of the story intentionally because it is as if Jesus is saying that out of risk takers, there are no losers. That if we will take risks on his behalf, we will always come out the winner. The reality is that in Christianity when it comes to this life that God has entrusted to us "playing it safe" is usually the most dangerous place to be.

Playwright Neil Simon said, "If no one ever took risks Michelangelo would have painted Sistine floor." The great theologian Wayne Gretsky said, "You miss 100% of shots you never take." And famous missionary Hudson Taylor said, "Unless there is risk in our exploits for God, there is no need for faith."

You see, the third servant wasn't punished for doing bad things with the talents he was given. He was punished for doing nothing. It's hard for us to accept that when it comes to our talents inactivity is as bad if not worse than misuse. The third servant is called "wicked and slothful." One of the Gnostic gospels from the second century that didn't make the cut in our current Bible tried to "improve" Christ's story. It adds that the third servant "squandered his money on harlots and flute players." Apparently at the time those were the two worst categories of people - watch out for those flute players!

Inactivity is very serious sin because it speaks to our unrealized potential. Theologians created a category for inactivity called sins of omission. They are the actions that we should do, that we are called to do, but that for whatever reason we leave undone. In fact Jesus says in John 15 that any branch that is not bearing fruit will be cut off and thrown away.

For the Christian, inactivity is not an option. There is no such thing as a Christian who is not serving. To be a Christian is to be a servant. That's the way Jesus designed it. And so we believe that there are no bleachers at Grace. There are no sidelines. There is only the game. And we want, in fact expect every person who calls this their church home to be involved in the game. There is no room for inactivity. We see a church filled with people who are serving shoulder to shoulder for the advancement of God's kingdom.

And so I say to you, get off the sidelines, there are bold prayers that need to be prayed, desperate people who need to be won, important meals that need to be served, life-giving conversations that need to be initiated, willing children who need to be taught, frustrated Christians who need to be encouraged, history altering projects that need to be supported. And your part may be to move chairs, or to enter data, or to stuff envelopes, but on the larger screen God's kingdom is forcefully advancing because of people like you.

So what is it that is holding you back? Is it time or fear or inadequacy? Is it comparing your talents to someone else's? Remember God gives varying degrees of talents but expects equal risk. For many of you, it's time to take a risk get in the game. No matter how inadequate you feel, Lord of the Gift has experience in filling in the gaps for risk-takers. A little boy took a risk by stepping forward with his sack filled with 5 loaves and 2 fish and Jesus fed ten thousand. A woman took a risk by dropping 2 small mites in the offering plate, but it was all she had and Jesus called it the top gift in the whole financial campaign. Remember, we serve the one who used dirt and spit to make sightless eyes see; he's the one who has made corpses inhale, he's the one who used 12 bumbling followers to change the course of human history, he used a waiter named Steven to spark a revolution. He's an amazingly resourceful guy this Lord of the Gift.

There is no excuse for Christian inactivity. The third servant blamed it on the master's heavy handed approach, but the master called his lie and turned it back on him and focused on his unwillingness to take a risk. Remember, we serve Jesus, the ultimate risk-taker. Jesus left Heaven's abundance and entered the world to be slaughtered for you and me, and the Bible says, "And then because Jesus had already done the really hard part, he gathered his followers together and said, "Now go into all the world and have really successful careers, and drive nice cars and build big houses and have safe and respectable and comfortable lives." (Hallucinations 1:10) Actually it says, as the father sent me, so I am sending you – go make disciples of all nations. Go. You have a mission – there's a reason why you are on this planet and it's not all about you. Now go and do it and stop getting caught up in all the distractions.

3. They Choose Lavish Reward Over Punishment

21"His master replied, '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!'

28" 'Take the talent from him and give it to the one who has the ten talents. 29For 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. 30And throw that worthless servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'

What could be greater than to reach the end of our days and to have God say "well done?" I have heard many people and preachers say, "The goal of my life is to hear those words 'well done.'" And I agree that would be incredibly satisfying. But you need to know that the passage doesn't stop there. Some people imagine that heaven is going to be a bunch of people floating on clouds, playing harps, and singing Cum Bah Yah for a jillion years. This passage gives us a little glimpse, "come and share your master's happiness."

Now this is the good stuff. At that moment, you and I will enter into the ultimate creative venture. You will get to experience the reality that you were created for in the first place. Every longing of your heart, every dream you've ever had will be fulfilled and far surpassed in that moment. The Lord will invite you to your ultimate assignment – to spend eternity serving and savoring the happiness of Christ. Can you imagine what God's happiness is like? He can have anything. He has no boundaries and no limits. His happiness is perfect.

You see a faithful servant understands the life and death nature of the game. He realizes that pleasing the Lord of the gift is the primary aim of his life. That nothing could be more important. And he also understands that when the master returns, there will be life and death consequences for the decisions that he made about that which was entrusted to him. And in that moment when lavish reward is offered – ever moment of distraction from his

lifetime, every temptation or sin, every thought of lust or success will seem all the more silly in comparison to this reality he is now being introduced to.

C.S. Lewis says it best in his sermon, *The Weight of Glory*: “If we consider the unblushing promises of reward and the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the Gospels, it would seem that our Lord finds our desires not too strong but too weak. We are halfhearted creatures fooling about with drink and sex and ambition, when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mudpies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.”

We also get a glimpse of the alternative in verse 30. The unfaithful servant is removed from the master’s happiness to an eternal reality of sadness and pain. As best I can tell from the New Testament, hell is a real place. It’s not figurative and it’s not made up. It is the final resting place for those who did not take seriously the instructions of the Lord of the Gift, and who in the end proved unfaithful with what they were given.

Abe Lincoln and one of his aids attended the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church one Sunday. After the service his aid asked Lincoln how he liked the sermon. Lincoln responded by saying that it was well thought through, powerfully delivered, and eloquent. “So was it great?” his aid responded. “No,” Lincoln said, “it failed because the preacher didn’t ask us to do something great.”

Application

1. Know your gifts

I want to draw a narrow application from our story today. The Parable of the Talents is a story about seizing the opportunities that God has entrusted to us. And one of the things that the Lord of the Gifts gives to each believer is at least 1 spiritual gift. And Paul says in 1 Corinthians 12:1, “**Now about spiritual gifts I do not want you to be ignorant.**” And so we must be diligent about discovering and then investing the gifts that God has given us. And the major place that we are called to invest our gifts is the local church.

A spiritual gift is “any ability that is empowered by the Holy Spirit and used in any ministry of the church.” (Wayne Grudem) And the scriptures are clear that everyone who is a follower of Christ has been entrusted with at least one gift. And so, churches are collections of these people with a variety of different gifts that are meant to be unleashed for the strengthening of the church and then in turn the church is unleashed to be a force for the Kingdom of God in its community. And the proper use of spiritual gifts within the church will make the church so compelling to outsiders that people will be breaking down the doors to get in.

So just imagine if you will what a church of 500 adults would look like if they had all identified their gifts with pristine clarity, and deployed those gifts with unstoppable vigor, and submitted them with sacrificial humility. That church would be an unstoppable force. Where those with the gift of administration were set loose to make sure that the church runs well, and the teachers were unleashed to teach with passion and conviction, and people with the gift of mercy would lead the charge to help the poor and downtrodden, and the leaders were freed to lead, and those with the gift of intercession were charged with being the engine to this whole movement, and the helps people were all behind the scenes freeing everyone else to concentrate on what they do best. Sign me up for a church like that.

SHAPE Class coming – February 4.

2. Live out your calling as a servant

Put your hands out like this and go like this and just do that for a while. Babies come into the world and this is the way they are with their parents. They’re like, “Feed me and feed me now! I don’t care if it’s the middle of the night. And change my diaper. Change it now!” And then, when they get a little older, “I want a bike. I want this. I want that.” When they get a little older they say, “Send me to college,” and all this kind of stuff.

Then, do you know what happens if this doesn't get dealt with? People marry one another and they do this with spouses. They say, "It's your job to make me happy—to meet my needs. It's all got to come my way." And that destroys marriages. And then what happens is some people become Christians along the journey of life, and they start doing this to God. They say, "Hey God, answer my prayers. Make me healthier, happier, wealthier, and thinner. Come on. Fork over. That's your job, isn't it—just to meet my needs and make me happy?" And then people do this when they go to churches. They go into churches and they say, "All right, feed me. Take care of my kids. Solve my problems." And then they say, "If you don't do this, I'll go to the church down the street and see if they do it."

This condition is a depraved condition. This is a lot of what drives sinful behavior—is making your life "all about me." But the truth is that if you live your lives this way, you'll destroy yourselves. You'll destroy one another. You'll destroy the church and destroy families, so it's got to change. At the conclusion of each of our SHAPE classes we propose a different posture.

Put your arm out like this. Our responsibility as Christians is to allow the condition of our hearts to be turned from this to this. Do you know what this represents? If you ever went to a real expensive restaurant, they sometimes have servers at the table who stand there with a white towel over their arm. And that's all they do. They say, "If you spill or drool, I will be right there and I'll take care of it. My soul purpose for standing by the table is to serve you."

One night the disciples and Jesus were going to have dinner together and the foot-washing guy didn't show up. And the disciples were mad, and they were trying to figure out who fouled up and didn't get the foot washer there. And they're arguing about this whole thing. Jesus walks in the room, and you remember what he did. He just got a towel and put it over his arm. He got a bowl of water, and he washed the disciples' feet. And after he washed their feet he said, "Do you understand what I have just done? You call me teacher and Lord, and rightly so, for that is who I am. Now that I, your Lord and teacher, have washed your feet, you should wash one another's feet. Now that you know this, do this and you will be greatly blessed."

You will never know soul satisfaction and fullness of life through the avenue of self-gratification. If your basic orientation in life is acquiring, achieving, getting and making sure it kind of comes your way, you will gradually self-destruct—you will gradually destroy people around you, and you will wind up in a Christ less eternity. You will have a vacuum in your soul. The disease of self-absorption is that serious. But there is a better way. There is a way you can be greatly blessed by God and that is to put a serving towel over your arm and decide, from this day forward, you are going to be a servant to the Father and a servant to people.

Everybody in life usually figures out, at some point in life, how to get to the top of whatever arena they're in. If you work on Wall Street, the way to the top is to make a lot of money. If you're in Hollywood, the way to the top is make a lot of films. If you're in Washington D.C., the way to get to the top is get as near the Oval Office as you can. People figure out ways to get to the top. Jesus gave us the way to get to the top in the kingdom. The way to get to the top is to be a humble servant to the Father and to one another. If that's not what you signed up for when you became a Christian, I'm sorry, but you were misled. But servant hood is the way of the Father, it's the way of the cross, and it's the way for every Christian.

And the church is simply a collection or gathering of fellow servants. My prayer is that day by day, month by month, and year by year Grace would be a church more and more committed to the servant heart of Christ.