

THE PARABLE OF THE TALENTS

Matthew 25:14–30

Today we're looking at the parable of the talents in Matthew chapter 25. It's part of a sequence of teaching which Jesus gave about the end times and his second coming. In some ways it's similar to the parable of the tenants at the end of chapter 21. In that parable there was a landowner who went on a journey and entrusted his property to tenant farmers. His business was a vineyard. The owner sent servants to collect his fruit, but the tenants treated them shamefully, beating one, killing another and stoning a third one. Finally he sent his son. 'They will respect my son,' he said. But they didn't. They threw him out of the vineyard and killed him.

When we come to the parable of the talents, again we have a business man who goes on a journey. He leaves his property in the care of his servants. Eventually, after a long time, he returns to see how they've got on. This time it's not all bad news but it's not all good news either.

The first parable is all about the past. It's all about the nation of Israel, who were put in charge of God's work in the world. They failed spectacularly and tragically. God sent the prophets to warn them but they rejected them. Finally God sent his own Son, the Lord Jesus, and they crucified him. This parable brought those who heard Jesus from the past to the present.

The parable of the talents was not about the past. It was about the future. It was not about the nation of Israel. It was about the Christian church. But we should not ignore the similarity between the two parables. Israel got it wrong – so very wrong. What about the church? Will history repeat itself or will we learn the lessons of the past?

We live in an age that doesn't rate history very highly. It's now that matters. But that's a very short-sighted view. Those who ignore the mistakes of history are condemned to repeating them.

Everything in the history of Israel led up to the coming of Christ and everything in the history of the church is leading up to the second coming of Christ. That's what the parable of the talents is all about.

The importance of Christ's second coming is evident from the teaching which Jesus gave about it. It dominates two whole chapters of Matthew, chapters 24 and 25. First we have teaching concerning the signs of Christ's coming. Then we have no less than five parables indicating that we should be ready for Christ's coming and explaining exactly how we should be ready.

First there's the parable of the thief in the night in chapter 24 verses 42 to 44. 'Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come. But understand this: If the owner of the house had known at what time of night the thief was coming, he would have kept watch and would not have let his house be broken into. So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him.'

When will Jesus return? That's a question that has fascinated Christians since the very beginning. The fact is we don't know and we're not meant to know, though that hasn't stopped people trying to work it out. Don't be taken in. Jesus said explicitly, 'It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority.' 'No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels, nor the Son, but only the Father.' If you find someone who thinks they know more about the second coming than Jesus himself then that should be a big warning to you.

We don't know the day or the hour. We're just told to keep watch.

The second parable Jesus told is in chapter 24 verses 45 to 51. 'Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom the master has put in charge of the servants in his household to give them their food at the proper time? It will be good for that servant whose master finds him doing so when he returns. I tell you the truth, he will put him in charge of all his possessions. But suppose that servant is wicked and says to himself, "My master is staying away a long time," and he then begins to beat his fellow servants and to eat and drink with drunkards. The master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he is not aware of. He will cut him to pieces and assign him a place with the hypocrites, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'

This parable adds more detail to the picture. It takes us a step further from readiness to responsibility. It reminds us that we are servants, literally slaves, and it brings things down to an individual level. Two things are required of Christ's servants. They must be faithful and they must be wise. Being faithful involves having faith. The master is away. Who knows when he will return? It takes faith to believe what you cannot see. You have only his word for it.

Being faithful also involves persevering, not giving up, not being disloyal, being absolutely dependable.

The specific servant Jesus is thinking about has a major responsibility: to look after the other servants in the household and give them their food at the proper time. This is a particular message for pastors and teachers. Like shepherds they are to lead the flock and feed the flock and keep the flock together. There is a calling to minister God's word to his people. It is a high calling and one which must not be neglected. 'It will be good for that servant whose master finds him doing so when he returns.'

But what if the servant neglects his duty? 'Suppose that servant is wicked and says to himself, "My master is staying away a long time," and he then begins to beat his fellow servants and to eat and drink with drunkards. The master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he is not aware of. He will cut him to pieces and assign him a place with the hypocrites, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'

Those are solemn words. There are temptations to be resisted: lack of faith, neglect of duty, self-indulgence instead of sacrificial service. This parable presents two possible outcomes and they could not be more different. For the faithful, wise servant, 'I tell you the truth, he will put him in charge of **all** his possessions.' For the unfaithful, unwise servant, 'he will cut him to pieces and assign him a place with the hypocrites, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth'.

The third parable is in Matthew chapter 25 verses 1 to 13, the parable of the ten virgins. Perhaps this parable is the most difficult to understand in that it takes us into customs which are very different to ours today. It's all about a wedding and we don't do weddings quite like they did. The bridegroom would go with his friends to the bride's house in the evening. After a simple wedding ceremony he would take her to his home for a wedding feast to which all their friends were invited. The friends would be waiting by the roadside in their best clothes before going to the new home in a torchlight procession.

That's the setting for Jesus' parable. There's no special significance in the fact that the young women were virgins. They were simply young, unmarried women. It's a sad indictment on our society that in our context the assumption would be that young unmarried women of that age would not be virgins. In Jesus' time the assumption was that they would be.

'At that time the kingdom of heaven will be like ten young women who took their oil lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish and five were

wise. The foolish ones took their lamps but did not take any oil with them. The wise ones, however, took oil in jars along with their lamps. The bridegroom was a long time in coming, and they all became drowsy and fell asleep.'

There are two things to notice here. First, the coming of Jesus is linked to the kingdom of heaven, and it's a very happy occasion. It's a time of celebration, a celebration of love and commitment. It's a new start full of promise and joy. Jesus often compared the coming of God's kingdom to a great feast.

The second thing is yet another indication that there would be a delay in the second coming. It was a long time before the bridegroom arrived.

Now, the sequel. 'At midnight the cry rang out: "Here's the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!" Then all the girls woke up and trimmed their lamps. The foolish ones said to the wise ones, "Give us some of your oil; our lamps are going out." But they said, "No, there may not be enough for both us and you. Go to the shop and buy some for yourselves." But while they were on their way to buy the oil, the bridegroom arrived. The girls who were ready went in with him to the wedding banquet. And the door was shut. Later the others also came. "Sir! Sir!" they said. "Open the door for us!" But he replied, "I tell you the truth, I don't know you." Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour.'

The message of this parable can be summed up in two words. Be prepared. All ten young women fell asleep. There's no blame attached to that. It was a long wait. The difference between being wise and being foolish lay in how prepared they were for that long wait. They all had lamps. They all had oil in their lamps but the foolish ones did not take any spare oil to fuel their lamps in the event of a delay, and they were caught out.

The coming of Jesus will be a great occasion, something to be celebrated and enjoyed, the coming of the kingdom of heaven. Be faithful. Be wise. Be prepared. But how are we to be prepared? The answer to that question lies in the fourth parable, the parable of the talents.

The focus shifts once again from the time when Jesus will return to the intervening period before he comes back. 'Again, it will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted his property to them.'

The parable of the talents is open to misunderstanding because of a simple difference in language. In the original context a talent was a sum of money. It had nothing to do with abilities or skills or whether you might get into the X Factor. It represented hard cash – no more, no less. How much cash it represented is difficult to say, exactly. A talent could be of gold, silver or copper. The word used in verse 18 for 'money' suggests that we're talking about silver talents here.

A talent was equivalent to 6000 denarii and a denarius was a day's wages. If we try to put this into modern currency, let's be very conservative and say that a day's wages is £40. Multiply that by 6000 and you get £240,000. On that reckoning the first servant is entrusted with over a million pounds. The second servant is entrusted with just under half a million and the third with around a quarter of a million. So we're not talking about peanuts here. We're talking serious money, a business investment. The NIV footnote which says a talent was worth several hundred pounds is well wide of the mark. It was worth much more than that.

So what is this saying? It's saying that the Lord has invested heavily in his church. He has given his servants tremendous responsibility, but matched by tremendous resources. And he's looking for a return.

In the parable that's what he got. 'The man who had received the five talents went at once and put his money to work and gained five more. So also, the one with the two talents gained two more.'

There was a difference in the amounts entrusted to each servant. You could say they weren't treated equally but they didn't say that, nor did Jesus imply it in any way. Jesus told another parable which addressed this issue. It's in chapter 20, and again it features the owner of a vineyard. He hired men out at the going rate for a day's work. He hired some at 6 o'clock, then 9 o'clock, 12 o'clock, 3 o'clock and 5 o'clock. Finally in the evening he paid them and they all received the same wage. The men who had worked longest were none too pleased but the owner insisted that he had the right to do it that way and that was the way it was going to be done.

In God's purpose we're not all equal but we'll all be treated fairly. Notice that in the parable of the talents the man who started with five talents and the man who started with two talents were given equal praise at the end for their efforts. They each doubled the capital they had been left with and to each of them the master said, '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!'

What does this mean for us? How does this help us to be ready for Christ's second coming. Three things.

1. God has given us all the resources we need to live for him, to live holy lives, productive lives, joyful lives. When Peter wrote his second letter he said this. 'Grace and peace be yours in abundance through the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord. His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.'

God has invested in us and he has invested heavily. Paul said, 'Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. ... In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding.'

2. God has given us different gifts and abilities and therefore different opportunities. Paul put it in these terms. We're like the body of which Christ is the head. There are arms and legs, hands and feet, eyes and ears, and all sorts of hidden bits. The foot can't say, 'Because I'm not a hand I'm not part of the body.' The eye can't say to the hand, 'I don't need you.' We're all different and we're all needed, and the key to success is not trying to be someone else but finding our own true potential.

Who are you? Where do you live? Where do you work? What are you good at? What are you not good at? What inspires you and gets you excited? The answers to these questions will be different for all of us but none of them will be the wrong answers.

3. We must use these gifts and opportunities to the full. If you've got two talents don't moan that you haven't got five. If you've got five talents don't gloat over the person with just two or condemn them because they're not capable of what you are. Come to terms with who you are, what God has given you, where God has put you, what God has allowed to happen to you, and then make the most of who you are and what you have.

Remember what Peter said, 'His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness.' He went on to say this. 'For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to

godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love. For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.'

Those are the resources we have been given. Those are the resources that need to be doubled in our lives.

In the parable of the talents it wasn't all good news. There was the servant who was sour, who resented the master and did the minimum. OK, he had far less than the other two but he could have done something with what he had, instead of doing nothing. He was wicked and lazy and worthless, and he stands as a warning to us.

Jesus is coming again and when he comes what will he find? I once read about a young man setting out in business. He approached an older man who had been very successful in business and asked him for the secret of success. 'It's quite easy,' the older man said. 'You've got to jump when opportunity comes.' The young man said, 'But how will I know when opportunity comes?' 'You won't,' the older man said. 'You've just got to keep jumping.'

When Jesus returns we've got to be ready. How will we know when Jesus is going to return? We won't. We've just got to keep believing. We've just got to keep obeying.