

## **YOU SERVE GOD AMBITIOUSLY**

**MATTHEW 25:14-30**

Before moving to the Columbus area in the mid-1980s, I lived in various places along the east coast. I attended seminary outside of Boston and my first full time ministry position was in Pennsylvania. My parents still lived in Florida at the time, so I often made that long drive down I-95 to visit them. For any of you who've taken long road trips, you know that creative billboard signs have a way of breaking up the monotony of the drive. I still remember one sign very vividly from my trips down I-95. It was a large picture of Jesus hanging on the cross with His head bowed in agony. Below that familiar scene was a caption in large letters: IT'S YOUR MOVE. That sign reminded the traveler of a basic spiritual fact. You can't do what God does and God won't do what you can do. Only God can forgive your sins or give your life new purpose and direction. Only God provides a way out of the dilemma your sin created: eternal separation from Him. Only God provides the answer to that problem: the cross and the empty tomb. But God doesn't respond for you. God won't force His love, His grace, His forgiveness or His healing upon you. That sign was exactly right. It's your move!

We're nearing the end of this message series on several of Jesus' parables. He told these stories to enlighten us on His favorite subject: the Kingdom of God. Each parable provides a key insight into the Kingdom: what it is... how it works... its values and priorities. The Kingdom of God is a spiritual country that is bigger than the physical universe and yet small enough for you to access personally. It's both the place where you connect with God and the full expression of God's mission for the universe. It's the place where Jesus reigns as the King in every dimension known and yet unknown. The Kingdom is present and real, but it hasn't been fully revealed yet. There's a whole lot more to come! Now in Matthew 25, we're considering three of Jesus' stories. Last week we looked at the first one – sometimes called the Parable of the Ten Virgins. This morning I want you to look with me at the second parable in this chapter – sometimes called the Parable of the Talents.

When Jesus is King, you serve God ambitiously. This story shares something in common with the first and the third story in this chapter. Yes, all of them are about the Kingdom of God, true enough. But each of them is a response to Jesus' teaching in the previous chapter. In Matthew 24, Jesus predicts the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 A.D. – some 40 years in the future – as well as His second coming at a future unknown date. Jesus is answering this question: What do Kingdom people look like and how do they live right now in light of Jesus' second coming? Last week, we learned that Kingdom people live wisely. Wisdom is a prevailing characteristic of Kingdom people – specifically, in light of Jesus' return, and also just in a general, everyday sense. What does this second story – the one we just read together – tell us about Kingdom people? If you are a follower of Jesus today, I suggest it underlines three important truths about you. First of all, you are...

## **ENTRUSTED WITH THE FATHER'S ABUNDANCE.**

The master in Jesus' story represents God Himself. The three servants represent three attitudes or responses to God. Each servant was given a different number of talents. Now, in Jesus' day, a talent was a weight of precious metal – usually gold – equal to about \$1000 in our currency. The English word for “talent” owes its origin to this story. But we use the word differently. We think of a talent as some kind of a natural ability. We say a person has a talent for music, organization, cooking or selling stuff.

The assumptions behind Jesus' use of that word “talent” are interesting. Notice that a talent here is something that belongs to the master not the servant. It's only given to the servant so he can do something with it. A talent didn't belong to the servant at all. It wasn't given to meet some need or desire of the servant. Instead, the talent was to be used to benefit the master in some way.

It's completely appropriate to associate these talents in Jesus' story with spiritual gifts found in Paul's letters in the New Testament. “There are different kinds of spiritual gifts, but the same Spirit is the source of them all. There are different kinds of service, but we serve the same Lord. God works in different ways, but it is the same God who does the work in all of us. A spiritual gift is given to each of us so we can help each other.” (1 Cor. 12:4-7 NLT) So, these spiritual gifts are given out to every follower of Jesus. They're not just natural abilities. They're supernatural abilities that help the Kingdom of God grow in some way. God doesn't give you spiritual gifts to meet some kind of personal need or desire, but you can and will enjoy putting your Spirit-given talents to work for the King.

Jesus' story implies that every one of His followers has been entrusted with the Father's abundance. True enough, some Jesus followers may be more spiritually gifted than others. After all, the three servants received a different number of talents. Do you know what supernatural talents or spiritual gifts God has given you personally? The question isn't whether you've been given a gift, but whether you will discover, develop and use that ability for God. The parable implies that God is inviting you to make an investment of your time, energy, abilities and financial resources in the only thing that will last – His Kingdom. It also implies that God fully expects a return on His investment in you.

Andy Eddington would go to prisons in Texas and preach to men on death row. On one of those trips, Andy and a friend stopped at a greasy spoon restaurant on their way home to Dallas. Andy loved sugar in his coffee, so he took not one, not two, but three teaspoonfuls of sugar. As the waitress watched, Andy said, “Ma'am, we're going to need more sugar for this table.” This Texas waitress looked at Andy and said, “Listen, bud, before I give you more sugar, you stir what you got.” Now, there's a sermon in there and the sermon is: Stir what you got. Use your gifts.

You're entrusted with the Father's abundance for an obvious reason: to help advance Jesus' love, grace and spiritual transformation. In other words, God invites you to help His Kingdom become fully revealed. No, He doesn't actually need your help, but He gives you the privilege of helping Him advance what matters most for all eternity: the Kingdom of God. But God won't force you into using – or using wisely and well - what He's given to you. So you're faced with the same choice every day of your life that those three servants in Jesus' story faced: will you be faithful or unfaithful, responsible or irresponsible, passionate or apathetic? It's your move! When Jesus is King, you serve ambitiously. Now, secondly, in Jesus' story you are:

### **EXHORTED AGAINST FAITHLESS ATROPHY.**

If you tied your arm to your side for a several months or even years and refused to use it, it would atrophy. In other words, it would lose its strength and abilities from lack of use. That's physical atrophy. There's such a thing as spiritual atrophy. That happens when you refuse to use the spiritual gifts or the talents God has put into you through His Spirit. Like the third servant, you just refuse to serve the King. It can involve squandering opportunities God gives you to share Jesus' love with someone. It might mean failing to support financially some Kingdom venture that God wants you to be involved in. It can happen on a personal level. It can happen on a church level. I believe God has given our church certain unique and wonderful opportunities to advance His Kingdom. We can be obedient and claim those opportunities. Or, we can be disobedient and find excuses not to follow where Jesus leads us as a church. Regardless of whether it's a person or a church, it's still true: what you don't use, you lose.

The real focus of Jesus' story is that third servant – the unfaithful one – who does nothing with the one talent he was given. He risks nothing; therefore, he achieves nothing. His small, self-centered motives are fully revealed when the master returns from his trip. Clearly, he's far more concerned about himself than his master. His own safety and security is far more important than serving his master well. His self-concern is so consuming that he fails to show even a little common sense and put the money in the bank so it could collect some interest. Did you notice that he wants to blame his master for his own irresponsibility? Basically, he says to his employer, "Look, I acted this way, because I know what kind of a person you are and I was afraid." The master says, "Oh, so you think I'm a harsh, unfair person? Very well then, I'll treat you in the way you think I will." He takes the one talent away from the unfaithful servant, gives it to the first servant and throws the unfaithful one off the estate.

What you don't use, you lose. Is it possible that you might neglect or misuse a Spirit-given talent God's given to you? Could spiritual atrophy happen to you? The parable implies that God doesn't have great compassion for people who claim to be Jesus' followers but who provide no return on His investment in them. It's very easy to make the Kingdom of God into some kind of spiritual spectator

sport instead of finding a way to participate in its success. Don't equate faithfulness with maintaining the status quo. That can happen in your personal life and it can happen in a local church. What's that? Just wanting to avoid anything that looks like a challenge or a risk either personally or as a church... just being content with a mediocre relationship with God personally or as a church ... just putting a higher value on being safe rather than being obedient personally or as a church. Resistance to change is not faithfulness.

God Himself is our example here. Talk about sacrifice, cost and risk! What is more demanding than for God to become a human being in the person of Jesus? What's more costly than the cross? What's riskier than putting the success of His Kingdom in the hands of fallen, sinful human beings like you and me? There's coming a day when you will stand before God and He will call you to account for how you used what He put into you. Will you be like that unfaithful servant and blame God? "God, I knew You were demanding. That's why I didn't even make any effort to live responsibly or faithfully!" Will some of you here today discover, sadly, that it was no one else's responsibility but your own to make sure you were productive for the Kingdom of God? It's your move! When Jesus is King, you serve God ambitiously. Now, thirdly, in Jesus' story you are:

### **ENCOURAGED TO FAITHFUL AMBITION.**

Is it OK to be ambitious? If by ambition, you mean being self-centered, stepping on others and getting ahead at any cost, then, of course not. But there is a healthy kind of ambition where you simply want to do your very best. Ambition is good in your relationship with God. You should have a strong ambition to see God glorified in all you do and are. You should have a burning, relentless desire for God to use you to help His Kingdom succeed or advance in some way.

Years ago, I read about a woman named Mabel Wright. I'm sure she's in heaven now. But, at the time, Mable was a 76 year old member of the First Baptist Church of Waterbury, CT. She and her church were located in a changing neighborhood with more and more families living on public assistance. Then some children living in the neighborhood dropped into church on Sundays. Mabel just took it upon herself to meet with those kids, talk to them and take at least one out for lunch each week. That opened the door to meet their parents and invite the whole family to church. As a result of her efforts and that of others, for several years that church had an effective, caring and compassionate ministry to its own neighborhood. It all started because one ordinary, elderly lady, Mabel Wright, was faithfully ambitious with her talents of hospitality and compassion that God had entrusted to her.

Two servants in Jesus' story were full of faithful ambition for their master. Jesus says, "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." (Mt. 25:16-17 NIV) There was a sense of urgency,

immediacy and passion in these two servants. They got after it! They had their master's interests at heart. His success was their success. His profit was their profit. His cause was their cause. His advantage was their advantage. They each doubled their investment. Obviously, they took some risks, worked hard, put themselves out there and it paid off big time. Now, remember, this is not their money; it belongs to their master. They didn't get to keep a cent of the initial investment or a cent of the profit they made on it!

What does it mean to you to be a follower of Jesus? Is it just so much eternal life insurance? Is it just so much waiting passively to die and go to heaven or for Jesus to come back and make everything OK for you? You're called to be ambitious for King Jesus and His eternal Kingdom. You have a task to fulfill on this planet – a great opportunity to claim, enter into and live out. At the end of the day, no one else can tell you what that task is but God. Find out what it is and then do it – urgently, passionately and ambitiously. Following Jesus means recognizing that you've been entrusted with spiritual abundance – Spirit-given talents, time, energy and financial resources – to help His Kingdom advance. The test that you know and love Jesus as your King is an unquenchable desire to discover, to develop and then to use faithfully whatever God has given to you.

I want you to notice one more thing about Jesus' story. Those two servants who were so wonderfully ambitious for their master – what kind of reward did they get? Greater responsibility. “The master said, “Well done, my good and faithful servant. You have been faithful in handling this small amount, so now I will give you many more responsibilities. Let's celebrate together!”” (Mt. 25:21,23 NLT) When you serve King Jesus well, you don't get to retire. And that's wonderful! There's a time and a place for physical or literal retirement. But there's no place for spiritual retirement. I'm not sure there's even spiritual retirement in heaven! I think we'll be busy up there doing stuff. But this side of heaven, whenever you serve King Jesus well, you get to do more for His Kingdom! You're given even more responsibility... even more challenges... even more opportunities to serve the King. My friend, the more you burn with a fire of faithful ambition for King Jesus' success, the more doors He will open to you – new doors of spiritual adventure and accomplishment. For the servant of King Jesus there's no greater thrill. It's why you're here!

TV journalist, Charlayne Hunter-Gault, was one of the first African-American students at the University of Georgia. She was involved in the early days of the civil rights struggle. One of her close friends was Ruby Doris Smith, a member of the Atlanta Student Movement, who died of cancer in her 20s. She was a great leader despite her young age and often held everyone together. Once, during sit-ins in Atlanta, a crowd began verbally abusing and taunting the students – all of whom wanted to yell back. But Ruby Doris walked the line, whispering, “Don't forget why you're here. Don't forget why you're here.”

Followers of Jesus can easily forget why we're here. Why did God create you? Why did He send Jesus to die for your sins and be raised again hundreds of years before you were born? Just so you could be healthy, wealthy and wise? No. He wants you to be a citizen of the Kingdom of God and, as such, to serve King Jesus faithfully and ambitiously every day that you breathe. Jesus' stories in Matthew 25 all answer the same question: If Jesus is coming back again (that's a certainty) and one day all there will be is the Kingdom of God, how should you live your life today? Last week the answer was – live wisely. Today the answer is – live productively. When Jesus is King, you serve God ambitiously. You're entrusted with the Father's abundance. You're exhorted against faithless atrophy. You're encouraged to faithful ambition. Don't ever forget why you're here. It's your move!