

Parable of talents

Last week looked at the parable of 10 virgins or bridesmaids which reminded us of the need to be ready for Jesus return. And we looked back to chapter 24 to see what that might mean. We said that the absolute bottom line was being in a relationship with God – accepting that Jesus is the Son of God, that he died on the cross so that we could be forgiven, that he rose again, and that by faith in him we can be transformed by the power of His Spirit in us.

And we went on to say that having made that step of commitment to God, Jesus calls us to live out that commitment while we wait for him to return. He calls us to have consistency between what we claim to believe and how we live our lives. Being ready for Jesus return then isn't a passive thing – waiting by the door, but active – serving Christ as his ambassadors.

The parable that we are looking at this morning continues this idea. In this parable the master, unmistakably a reference to Jesus, goes away on a journey, also unmistakably a reference to the time between his accession to heaven after his resurrection and his return in glory. Again, while not the main point of the parable, the fact that the Master's return is unpredictable but certain is a source of encouragement and hope as we wait for Jesus return.

And while the Master is away, he entrusts all that belongs to him to his servants – a reference to the disciples. They are given the responsibility of looking after his business, his land, his assets while he is away.

Each of the servants is given a quantity of money, 5 talents, 2 talents and 1 talent. No-one is sure how much a talent was worth but it doesn't really matter as the issue at hand isn't really the money.

It is fitting that the monetary unit referred to is the talent, because that is the Greek word that lies behind the common English word – talent – i.e. gift, special aptitude. And that is what the money in the parable symbolises – not just financial resources, but all the personal gifts, experiences, special aptitudes that we have been given by God.

The fact that the 3 servants are entrusted with different quantities of talents according to their ability reinforces this deeper meaning of the word talent, and is important later in the story, as it removes the possibility of the servants claiming that the responsibility was too much or indeed too little.

If the servants failed, they couldn't use the excuse that they were overwhelmed. They couldn't argue that the Master had promoted them to the level of their incompetence, which seems to be a modern day strategy in many businesses. The footnote in my NIV states that failure could come only through laziness or hatred towards the master.

So having been entrusted with their talents, we are told that the servant entrusted with 5 talents immediately went and put his money to work and doubled what had been given to him – likewise the second servant. We aren't told how they did this, and that isn't the point of the parable, the point is that they made good and effective use of what they had initially been given by the Master.

By contrast, the third servant went off, dug a hole in the ground and hid the Master's money. And unlike the first 2 servants, there is no mention of gain, only preservation.

Then, after a long time, indicating the delay in Jesus return, the Master returned and settled accounts with the servants, a reference to the final judgement that will take place when Jesus returns. I know that judgment is unpopular and not very PC – but there is no getting away from the fact that Jesus makes it clear in the NT that judgement is a certainty – there will be an unavoidable settling of accounts when he returns.

And so the servants come one at a time – and notice that the first two servants say exactly the same thing – Master – you entrusted me with 5 or 2 talents, a recognition that what they had came from the Master, See I have gained you 5 or 2 more.

It is clear that the relationship between these two servants and their master is good. There seems to be a desire to please the master. They have done what the Master wanted them to do, they have looked after his interests, made sure that his business has flourished.

So to each of them the Master says– 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 masters happiness, a reference to the blessing of the kingdom that believers will enjoy as we spend an eternity in God's presence in heaven.

But notice that their reward is the same. The one who had made 5 talents didn't receive a greater reward than the one who made 2 talents. And that's because they aren't rewarded according to the number of their talents, they are rewarded according to what they did with their talents – they are rewarded for being good and faithful – for using what they had been given to build the Masters Kingdom.

Then it is the turn of the third servant. And notice that his response to the master is very different. He doesn't begin by acknowledging what the Master had given him, he begins by trying to justify what he did with what he had been given. His response indicates that unlike the first two servants, this third servant doesn't have a good relationship with the master. His relationship is characterised by fear – and he is paralysed by a fear of failure – fear of losing the one talent that he had been given.

But the response of the Master reveals that the problem went deeper than just fear of failure – The Master calls the servant wicked and lazy – and says that the very least that the servant should have done was put the talent in the bank so that it earned some interest.

Burying it in the ground implied that the servant was not only afraid but also had no desire to please his master, no desire to be fruitful, no desire to see the Master's kingdom grow. To put the talent in the ground rather than the bank implied hostility to the master and his kingdom.

And as a result, this servant did not share in the blessing of the other two. In fact, the talent that this servant had been given initially was taken away, and he was left with nothing, and at that time of judgement was thrown outside into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Which again, while distinctly not PC, is unmistakably a reference to hell – a place of separation from God, where there will be pain and tears – not the kind of place that you book for a holiday, let alone an eternity.

So, the point that Jesus is making in this parable is fairly clear. He is talking about the time in between his accession to heaven and his second coming, and the responsibility of the disciples, his followers in that period. And it is clear that their, our responsibility, is to use the resources that we have been given by God, all our resources not just our money, but definitely including our money, to build his kingdom by doing his will.

It is not about being super spiritual, not about being minister or evangelist or overseeing missionary, unless that is what God has called you to do of course, it is about serving God with what we have where we are – it is a call to faithful and steady service.

And as important to this call to serve God with all the resources that he has given us, is the motive for serving God - Not because we are afraid of rebuke or punishment – but because we love our Father, and have a desire to see him honoured and glorified. Because we trust him.

And that positive relationship that we have with him gives us confidence to act, to use the resources that we have been given for his benefit, and maybe, when appropriate to take risks – safe in the knowledge that God won't punish us if we fail so long as our motivation, our desire was to please God and do his will – to do our best for him.

If then, while we wait for Jesus to return, we use the resources we have been given to build God's kingdom, if we continue to be about our Master's business, then when the Master returns, we will be rewarded, and will receive all the blessings of the kingdom.

But equally, this parable serves as a warning to those people that use what God has given them for selfish ends – who don't trust God, who have no desire to see God honoured or glorified, who don't build the kingdom of God and are even opposed to the building of the kingdom of God. Jesus indicates that they will be punished. And while we are given few details of this punishment, just as we are given few details of the blessing, it is pretty clear that it isn't going to be pleasant.

So again, as last week, the question that we are forced to ask ourselves and reflect on is quite simple – while we continue to wait for Jesus return, are we doing the masters business. If Jesus returned tonight, and asked us to give him an account of how we had used the resources he has given us, what we would say to him.

Would we in all honesty be able to say that we were doing his will? That we are using the huge resources that we enjoy living in the South of England for his glory.

Or, would we find ourselves making excuses for why we were using those resources for selfish ends, rather than for the kingdom.