

Accountability For The Stewardship Of Our Gifts

Will our reward be the joy of the Lord or outer darkness?

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You would be hard pressed to find an evangelical church in which spiritual gifts have not received attention, whether through a sermon series or Sunday school courses. There is also no shortage of reference material dealing with spiritual gifts. What often gets overlooked is the fact that we are accountable for the stewardship of our spiritual gifts.

The parable of the talents¹ deals with the responsibilities of the followers of Christ during His absence from the earth, the church age. A man entrusted his possessions to his slaves before leaving on a journey, giving one talent² to one slave, two talents to another and five talents to a third. When the man returned, he praised and rewarded the two slaves who had faithfully used the talents entrusted to them. The third slave who safely hid away his talent received condemnation and punishment for being wicked and lazy. Spiritually this parable represents the judgment upon the return of Christ of those who profess to follow Him based upon their service.

This parable speaks literally of money. We must remember, however, that parables use figurative language to illustrate deeper spiritual truths. It is not likely that Jesus is teaching us to wisely invest our finances so that when he returns He will have a fortune waiting for Him. The question then becomes; what do the talents represent? What did Jesus give to us in order to serve Him in His absence? The answer is the Holy Spirit and opportunity. Jesus promised that when He left He would ask the Father to give us a Helper, the Holy Spirit.³ Of particular relevance is the fact that the Holy Spirit gives spiritual gifts to each Christian just as He wills for the purpose of building up the body of Christ, the church.⁴ Similarly, we are presented with innumerable opportunities throughout our lives to be ministers of the grace of God. These opportunities arise both within the local congregation and outside in the world. Some such as pastors, evangelists, and Sunday school teachers have very visible opportunities. Other opportunities are very discrete, such as the personal encounters we have with people in our day to day lives. It is reasonable to conclude that the talents given to the slaves by the master signify the spiritual gifts given by the Holy Spirit to build up the church during the physical absence of Christ, and the opportunities to exercise those gifts.

The church is built up in two ways; by the addition of new members through salvation and by the spiritual growth of existing members. Since both

¹ Mat. 25:14-30.

² A talent was roughly 15 years wages; all three slaves received a small fortune.

³ John 14:16-17.

⁴ 1 Cor. 12:1-31; Rom. 12:3-8; Eph. 4:4-16.

salvation⁵ and subsequent spiritual growth⁶ are through the working of the Holy Spirit, it follows that we must be supernaturally empowered by the Holy Spirit if we are to play any role in the building up of the church. This is the purpose of spiritual gifts. After all, it is the Holy Spirit who testifies about Christ⁷, and who teaches truth and convicts of sin, righteousness, and judgment.⁸ Apart from the supernatural working of the Holy Spirit, any attempt at ministry would be in vain. In the Old Testament we read of instances of the Spirit of God coming upon individuals empowering them to perform spectacular miracles. As spectacular as these miracles were, they pale in comparison to the miracle of the fruitful ministry of the Gospel everyday by ordinary Christians empowered by the Holy Spirit working through us in the exercise of our spiritual gifts.

Returning to the parable of the talents, the slaves receiving two and five talents represent Christians who have been faithful stewards of the spiritual gifts entrusted to them. They have faithfully served Christ, contributing to the building up of the church through the exercise of their spiritual gifts. They will receive praise from Christ and blessings as they enter into the joy of the Lord. It is irrelevant whether a person has one or many spiritual gifts, whether the gifts are exercised in a visible public way, or quietly behind the scenes. What matters is that the gifts entrusted are faithfully exercised.

The slave receiving one talent is unsettling. If this passage ended with verse 29 we might conclude that he represents a person who has not accomplished anything in service to God but who has nevertheless been saved.⁹ This passage however concludes with verse 30 which points towards something very disturbing. This worthless slave is not invited to enter into the joy of his lord but rather is cast into the outer darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Elsewhere this language is used to describe the wicked being cast into hell.¹⁰ Scripture consistently teaches that a truly saved person cannot lose their salvation but, kept by the power of God, they will persevere until the end.¹¹ Since therefore this slave cannot represent a true Christian, he must symbolize a person who appears to be a Christian but in reality is unsaved. There are many passages warning that not everyone who thinks they are saved truly is.¹² Some might object, how can an unsaved person have spiritual gifts? This can be answered by the example of Judas. Until the time he betrayed Christ there was nothing to indicate he stood out in anyway from the other eleven. When Christ said one of the twelve would betray him there were not eleven fingers pointing at Judas,

⁵ E.g., John 3:5-8; 1 Pet. 1:2.

⁶ E.g., 1 Cor. 2:6-16; Gal. 5:16-24.

⁷ John 15:26.

⁸ John 14:26; 16:7-15.

⁹ Compare 1 Cor. 3:13-15.

¹⁰ E.g., Mat. 13:37-42, 49-50; 22:11-14; Lk. 13:24-28.

¹¹ E.g., John 3:14-21; 6:37-40, 47-51; 10:25-29; 14:1-3; Rom. 8:28-39; Heb. 3:14; 1 Pet. 1:1-9.

¹² E.g., Mat. 7:21-23; Mat. 13:24-30, 37-50; 22:2-14; Lk. 13:22-28; John 14:15-24; 1 Cor. 6:9-10; 2 Cor. 13:5; Heb. 10:26-31; James 2:14-26; 2 Pet. 2:12-22.

instead each disciple feared that he himself was the one.¹³ Judas healed the sick and lame, cast out demons and preached the gospel of the kingdom. Such miracles could only have been performed by the working of the Holy Spirit, yet the evidence is that Judas was not truly saved.¹⁴ Furthermore all professing Christians have many opportunities to serve. If a person professes to be a Christian and yet makes no effort to serve Christ, this parable provides a grave warning. There is a very real possibility that such a person has deceived himself into believing he is saved when in truth he is not.

The parable of the talents powerfully demonstrates that we are accountable for the stewardship of the spiritual gifts and ministry opportunities entrusted to us. Examining our own stewardship provides us an accurate indication of whether we should expect to enter into the joy of the Lord or to be cast into the outer darkness.

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¹³ Mat. 26:21-22.

¹⁴ Mat. 26:24; John 6:70-71; 17:12.