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## THE PARABLE OF THE TALENTS

### Using Our Hidden Gifts

MATTHEW 25:14-30

For the first time in my life I had invested in mutual funds. A friend, one of the nation's foremost financial advisors, had helped me sort out my priorities. "If you want to play it safe," he said, "put your money in a fund where you can expect steady growth. That way you can leave it alone for a long period of time and not have to worry about it. If that's what you want to do I recommend the Fidelity Freedom Fund."

"On the other hand," he said, "if you are willing to 'work' your fund, follow the stock market every day, and perhaps have a spectacular increase in your money, I recommend the Fidelity Overseas Fund — which is the hottest thing going right now."

I thought about what he said. I considered my time, my desires, and my rather dismal past record of financial investments. I concluded I should choose the safe (but slow) growth fund.

A year later I was flying back to my home in Florida from the West Coast and picked up a financial magazine on the airplane. Leafing through the pages, I found a full-page ad with a bold-faced headline. "If you had invested \$10,000 in the Fidelity Overseas Fund ten months ago, today it would be worth \$24,655."

I sat in my seat, staring out the window at passing time and space, and felt the bile of REGRET welling up inside me. It was the same feeling I had felt the year before when I was in Lebanon and drank something I had been warned could make me horribly nauseated. Only this time I didn't want to vomit, I just wanted to sit and cry.

I recalled Whittier's lament in Maud Muller:

"For of all sad words of tongue or pen,  
The saddest are these: 'It might have been.'"

The realization that I could have been wealthy set off a chain reaction of the other mummified regrets I have lugged with me across the years, wrapped corpses of things not done. These are the "Had-I-only-done" things which creep out of the anxiety closet of my mind to haunt me on those rainy, lonely nights when I'm away from home and someone has just told me it's time to face up to my worthlessness.

Had-I-only mortgaged everything I had and invested in the Overseas Fund. At the bottom of the magazine page, in small type, was a disclaimer. "Past performance is no guarantee of future results and the fund can be volatile." It made no difference. It made no difference that the newspaper that morning showed the Overseas Fund had plunged drastically, and those who didn't have enough financial sense to get out ahead of time had lost millions. All I could think of was that 140 percent increase over ten months.

Had-I-only bought that property next door when my neighbor tried to sell it to me. Today it is worth ten times what it was then.

Had-I-only continued with my piano lessons when I was a boy.

Had-I-only studied Spanish and Russian when I was in college.

Had-I-only not stopped by that woman's house 25 years ago.

Had-I-only not put my wife through some of the hell she suffered because of my foolishness.

Had-I-only spent more time with my children when they were small.

I sat for more than an hour feeling sorry for myself, swilling around in the mud and mire of “it might have been.” Then a Bible verse flickered through my mind: “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!” (2 Corinthians 5:17).

My life was not all minuses. There were some pluses as well.

I remembered my father’s balance sheets in his big green ledger books. A true balance sheet includes assets as well as liabilities. Laying down the magazine, I took pad and pen from my briefcase. Pulling down the little tray from the back of the seat in front of me, I made two columns on the yellow paper. One I titled, “Wish I had (or had not).” At the top of the other column I wrote: “Glad I did (or did not).”

I started with the minus column. By the time I finished I had written 12 things. Sure, there were many others I could have dug back and found — things like “I wish I had not gone 52 miles-per-hour in that 40 miles-per-hour speed zone 13 years ago.” But I had paid the penalty for that (\$28) and learned my lesson. The things I listed were the things I was still paying for. The things that had left scars on me and others.

When I got to the bottom of the list I was feeling considerably better. I leaned back and mused. “That’s not so bad for a 55-year-old guy.”

Excited, I started on the “Things-I’m-glad-I-did” column.

The more I wrote, the better I felt. I’m glad I met my wife-to-be when we were in high school. I’m glad I married her and not someone (anyone) else. I’m glad I committed my life to Jesus Christ when I was 21-years-old. I’m glad I went to a Christian college rather than the state school that offered me a football scholarship. I’m glad I didn’t accept the army commission which was offered when I graduated, but went on to seminary instead — even though I hated preachers. I’m glad . . . on and on the list went. Page after page. I was just getting into the list of things I was glad I had given away when the plane landed and I had to stuff my pad back into my briefcase.

I left the magazine on the seat of the plane — still open to the financial ad. With it I left my regrets. I walked down the steps to a loving family and church — a wealthy man. Again I remembered Whittier’s comments on poor Maud Muller:

“God pity them both and pity us all,  
Who vainly the dreams of youth recall.

I paraphrased the rest of the poem.

“For of all GLAD words of tongue or pen,  
The gladdest are these: ‘NO REGRETS.’”

Surely there can be no more welcome words to fall on the ears of our soul than to reach the end of the line and hear our Master say, “Well done, good and faithful servant . . .”

Man has been placed on earth as a caretaker of God’s business. Each of us has been given a portion of life and charged with the responsibility of taking care of it, increasing it, and finally presenting it back to God for His approval.

The final week of His life on earth, Jesus spent a lot of time with His close friends-trying to teach them about the Kingdom of God. He had just finished telling them a parable about some bridesmaids who didn’t prepare and missed the wedding. He warned them that tough times were coming and they needed to have spiritual reserves. Then, spotting a caravan leaving the city of Jerusalem, He launched into another story to illustrate the importance of stewardship.

“The Kingdom of God,” He said, “is like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted his property to them. To 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.”

A talent was a measure of weight used by the Greeks, such as an ounce or a pound is a Western weight term. When used to measure silver, it became the term used to describe money. In Jesus' day the term "talent" probably described the amount of silver worth about \$1,000 in today's market. (A talent of copper would have been worth less, a talent of gold worth more.) The "talent" therefore was the monetary medium, just as today we would say "dollar," "peso," "pound," or "guilder," depending on your national exchange medium.

In the parable Jesus told, the master distributed money to his servants. To one he gave \$5,000, to another \$2,000, to a final one he entrusted \$1,000.

The man who had received the five talents went at once and put his money to work. Perhaps he invested it in Fidelity Overseas, or maybe he bought seed, planted a crop, and doubled his resources. When he finished he had doubled his amount and now had \$10,000.

The man with the two talents did the same, doubling his money as well.

But the man who received \$1,000 was fearful. He dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money. He wanted to be sure he kept it safe and therefore was afraid to invest in risky ventures.

Sometime later, Jesus continued, the master of those servants returned and settled accounts with them. He commended the two servants who had increased what they had received. In fact, his commendation was the same for the man who had received two talents as for the one who had received five. But he had the harshest condemnation imaginable for the fearful servant who proved to be lacking in innovation, imagination, and faith — the one who did nothing more than return to him what he had received, without growth or increase.

The key to this parable is the word "afraid." The two servants who received the master's blessing were daring, adventuresome, willing to risk. But the master severely condemned the final servant for being afraid, telling him the least he could have done was to have put his talent in an interest-bearing bank account, buy a certificate of deposit, or invest it in something safe like the Fidelity Freedom Fund.

But the fellow had done nothing. He just buried his master's legacy in the ground where it actually lost money on an inflationary market.

"Take the talent from him and give it to the one who has the ten talents. For 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. And throw this worthless servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth'" (Matthew 25:28-30).

Those words in Jesus' parable used to bother me until I realized the context of the story. Jesus was talking not only to His disciples but to a group of religious people who were standing around listening. These scribes and Pharisees — masters of the Jewish law — were perfectly pictured in Jesus' description of the fearful servant. Fearful of losing the law that God had given them, they had become highly protective. They had taken His wonderful revelation and hidden it away, determined to keep it to the letter. But in the process, they had lost all.

God gives everyone the same opportunity. The scribes and Pharisees, however, had made a conscious decision to risk not. Thus, when the master returned and demanded an accounting (and there is always a payday), they had nothing to give God but that which they had received in the first place. In fact, they didn't even have that, for the revelation of God is given for one reason alone — growth and expansion.

God does not want us to keep anything — including the Law. Actually, the Law keeps us. If all we do is try to keep it, we lose it. We possess only that which we give away.

That which we have is given so that it may be improved upon. Life is not a museum, and we are not charged with being curators of antiquity. God has given us life and His own revelation so we can use our imagination and spirit of adventure (another word for "faith") to expand, improve on, enlarge that which has been entrusted to us.

The whole aim of the scribes and Pharisees was to keep the Law exactly as it was. In fact, it was said of the scribes and the Pharisees that "they sought to build a fence around the Law." The

Torah was more important than anything else on all the earth. They clutched their scrolls, protecting them with their lives. Any change, any alteration, anything new was forbidden.

If the disciples did with the revelation Jesus gave them what the scribes and Pharisees had done with the revelation of Moses, the Kingdom of God would grind to a halt. Jesus gave His revelation and instructed His disciples not to keep it, but to share it. In fact, He literally “commissioned” His followers to “go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation” (Mark 16:15).

The basic purpose of the religionists was to hold on to what God had given them. Their Torah was so precious that no gentile could even look at it, much less touch it. It was kept in a huge silver case, protected from foreign eyes.

Now here comes Jesus, breaking down that concept. He said to His perplexed disciples, “I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to My voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd” (John 10:16).

Jesus was saying, “I don’t want you to try to protect, preserve, or defend the Gospel. I want you to risk everything to give it away.”

Jesus’ purpose on earth was to make all things new, to challenge us to enlarge and expand our concepts, thoughts, and minds. But here was a group of people who had paralyzed God’s truth by hating anything that was new. “I will not think any new thoughts. I will not take any new action. I will not venture out. I will not explore. I will only do that which I have done, that which is safe.”

There can be no spiritual advancement without some kind of risk, some kind of adventure. God has only condemnation for the shut mind.

I grew up in a denomination that would never allow the people in the churches to hear anyone except a speaker of their own persuasion. No Methodist (they were too liberal); no Episcopalian (they drank wine at Communion), no Catholic (they submitted to Rome), and certainly no Pentecostal (they seemed out of control) was allowed behind the pulpit. We were afraid of pollution.

Those ancient scribes and Pharisees are not the only “jot and tittle” people. The legalists, the religionists, the “keepers of the Law” remain in our midst. That is the reason this parable is so relevant today. Jesus teaches we don’t have to be afraid of truth, regardless of the clothes it wears, the language it speaks, or the culture it comes from. Jesus has sent His Holy Spirit who enables us to discern that which is truth and that which is falsehood. That is one of the marvelous gifts He gives people, the ability to sort through and spit out the bones and swallow the meat. Even a cow has enough sense to spit out the sticks and swallow the grass.

There are those, for instance, who say: “All psychology is of the devil. All rock music is of the devil. All Catholics are of the devil.”

Others say: “All charismatics are of the devil. Stay clear of anyone who speaks in tongues.”

There is truth, although not complete truth, in every denomination, in every culture. In every expression of Godly worship there are areas of truth. Some worship Him in dance, others in kneeling; some in wild abandonment with clapping and shouting, others in quietness and tears. God merely asks us to open our minds to all things.

When Corrie ten Boom came to our church to speak some years ago, my wife — who had been bombarded from all sides by people who were telling her various ways to cast out demons — went to her.

“Tante Corrie,” she asked, “What method do you use to take authority over demons?”

The venerable Dutch saint looked at her with stern face but sparkling eyes and said, “I use whatever method God tells me to use.”

The Pharisaical approach to ministry is to say, “There is only one way. Close the door on all ways other than my way.” Immediately, however, we discover we have shut out every voice except the voice of the past as it is filtered through us. That means we cannot trust anyone except ourselves. Then, when we find we, too, are flawed — we’re in big trouble.

There can be no spiritual advance without adventure. God says, “Open your minds.” He wants our minds open to truth regardless of the fact it may cut across our desires, traditions, or previous conclusions. Growth comes painfully. Virtue comes only through confrontation — with self, with our adversaries, with God. Beware of people, including yourself, who say, “Don’t confront me. Don’t ask me questions about what I believe. Don’t invade my comfort zone. Leave me alone.”

I recently asked our church staff to begin critiquing my sermons. Some were afraid I might react if they disagreed with what I said or how I said it. Others felt it was wrong to criticize their spiritual leader. A few felt uncomfortable critiquing my “words from God” to my face, preferring to do what they had always done — criticize me behind my back. However, when the staff began to realize I not only wanted but needed their input, they slowly began to open up. It was painful to me, but I knew I needed their collective wisdom. I also knew the only way I was going to be able to grow was to be open to confrontation.

Totalitarianism, in government or religion, denies growth and change and destroys individuality. We cannot talk about justice and truth unless we talk about freedom at the same time. Freedom is the cloak that surrounds justice. As an individual I must have the right to think and the freedom to explore. Although I must be open to what others think, I must never let my mind be controlled by anyone else’s thinking.

Jesus came to release people to think. The beauty of our walk with Christ is its diversity. If we only listen to those with whom we agree, we will never grow, we will never walk into truth. That is risky, but Jesus teaches in this parable that unless we risk that which He has given us, we are in danger of losing all.

Here are eight things this parable teaches:

### **1. The giving of spiritual gifts is a sovereign action.**

Remember, Jesus was not talking about money when he used the talent as His medium. He was talking about the things God gives to each one of us. The master in Jesus’ parable was not obligated to distribute anything to anyone. He gave freely, but he also gave sovereignly. The servants had no say-so over what they received. That was the master’s business. So, different people have different gifts. We should never envy another for the gift he has, nor complain about the gift we have (or don’t have) — that is God’s business.

Several years after Jesus told this parable a man by the name of Paul wrote a letter to the church at Corinth. He went into great detail to explain the gifts of the Holy Spirit — everything from the ability to discern spirits to speaking in tongues. “All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and He gives them to each man, just as He determines” (1 Corinthians 12:11).

God is the one who gives the money, the abilities, the gifts. He does it sovereignly. It is not up to us to question, but to rejoice and put to use that which He gives us, so we may present it back to him with increase “in the time of accounting.”

### **2. Everyone receives something. Nobody is excluded.**

Everybody in the Kingdom of God has been blessed by God with certain abilities, talents, resources. There is no one who can truthfully say, “I have received nothing from God. I am not worth anything.” Each of us has worth, and each of us has ability. “Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good” (1 Corinthians 12:7).

One woman recently spoke to me in my home. Her husband had left her to live with another woman. Since she was in poor health and unable to work, her only source of income was government welfare and an occasional child-support check from him. She was living in a dingy trailer in a drug-infested subdivision. She felt God had passed her by when the gifts were handed out.

“Where is your son?” I asked.

“He’s finishing his third year of college,” she said.

“How is he paying his tuition?”

“I give him a few dollars each month and he works late at night in a pizza restaurant to earn the rest.”

We sat quietly for a few moments. Then she spoke, smiling for the first time. “He is a great gift to me.”

“And you are a great gift to him,” I reminded her.

The purpose of gifts, great and small, is that they may be used to help someone else.

Our son, Tim, was born with some kind of mysterious learning disability. He finally made it to junior high school, with seemingly little chance to pass his courses. But God had given a gift to a woman in our church named Edna Hunt. She stepped forward and said, “I am supposed to tutor your son every afternoon after school.” She did that for a year, meeting him in one of the back rooms in our church building. She took his assignments from school and with painstaking effort walked him through each one. Over that two-year span we watched Tim gradually improve until he was able to pass all his classes and enter high school.

When Edna’s husband, Norv, was transferred out of town, my son was left alone, floundering in a huge high school. The very first week he was there he was attacked by a senior boy. He fought back, defending himself. The principal suspended both boys for two weeks. Tim was devastated. There seemed to be no way he could ever catch up, much less graduate. Then a man named Tom Law, a teacher in the high school, approached us. “I’ve watched your son,” he said. “He has great potential. I want to give him what I have.” For almost three years Tom used his gift to tutor Tim after school and on weekends. Tim not only graduated, but went on to complete a two-year college course in agriculture and farm management.

Everyone has received something precious. As we invest what we have — no matter how small — God gives the increase and the blessing: “Well done, good and faithful servant.”

No one can say he is not important. Everyone has worth and importance. The only person who is worthless is the one who refuses to invest his gift in others, keeping it only for himself.

### **3. God gives each of us differing gifts.**

It’s not the gift that matters, but how we use it. God never demands from us abilities we don’t have. He never asks us to do something He has not gifted us to do. If he asks us to do something, he has either given the gift already, or is getting ready to give it as we obey. He will never ask us to do something we cannot do.

Our problem arises when we try to equate our gifts with those others have received. If I could only sing as she sings. If I could only speak as he speaks. If I only had the administrative skills of that person. If I only had enough money to . . .

But it is not what we have that matters; rather it is how we use it. Once we understand that, life becomes peaceful. Once we understand God is in control of our lives, that He wants us to do only that which we can do, then we can be happy in what we are doing. This removes the threat of competition. I don’t have to win. All I have to do is obey.

God never demands from us abilities we don’t have. We demand that of ourselves. Or we demand it of one another. But God never does. All he wants us to do is to use fully all He has given us.

To be sure, there are things life demands that we do that we don’t feel called to do — but we can do them. By that I mean all of us have to do things that, if we don’t do them, won’t get done. These are the mandatory things in life. Either no one else will do them, or there is no one else to do them but us.

I don’t think, for instance, that I am especially gifted to carry out the garbage. But I have to do it, now more than ever. When my children were living at home I could command them to do

it. (They protested loudly that they were not gifted in that area, either; I reminded them of the difference between a gift and a call — my call.) Now that they are gone, I do it because I don't want to be inundated with garbage.

On the other hand, I know a man who stops by his invalid neighbor's house three times a week just to empty his garbage. He tells me of the great joy he has in fulfilling his gift in life: taking out his neighbor's garbage.

No one is equal in talents, but all of us can be equal in effort. My oldest son, Bruce, breezed through high school and college, worked in Congress as a legislative assistant for seven years, and then took a job with the National Aeronautics and Space Administration in public relations. He's a "white collar" man. My younger son, Tim, after struggling through school, has a "blue collar" job. He has a strong body, enjoys outside work, and is gifted with animals. Both are wise beyond their years and are excellent story-tellers. Bruce, however, is a writer. Tim is a talker.

Is one worth more than the other? Absolutely not. It's just that each has different gifts. All God asks of us is that we do our best with what we have received.

#### **4. The number of talents distributed to each servant is unequal.**

In this parable Jesus points out that some people are more "talented" than others.

I have taught my children that maturity begins when they realize two things. First: this is an unjust world in which we live. Nobody is going to treat you fairly. This world is going to take advantage of you every chance it gets. Planet Earth is a bad neighborhood. This world is populated with people who will kill you to save their own lives, who will lie about you to get an advancement, who will steal your money and pollute your children with their filth. To say "But it isn't fair," is simply to reveal your immaturity.

The second realization which marks the beginning point of maturity is this: somebody can always do it better than you can. The quicker you realize that, I tell my children, the less frustrated and dissatisfied you will be.

I've always wanted to be the best at something. But every time I think I've arrived, I look up to see there is a long line of people who have gotten there before me. When I reached the conclusion, "I'll never catch up with them; there will always be somebody who can do it better than I can," life became fun, rather than competition. I didn't have to win. I just had to volunteer to play.

God is not calling me to be the best — He's just calling me to give my best.

Like it or not, some are more talented than others. There is nothing wrong with that. We are not all the same. If we were, we would have no need for anyone else.

On the other hand, no one shows up on earth empty-handed, either. Each one's contribution is important to the body of Christ, just as each organ is vital to the human body.

We must not think we can do, or are expected to do, what every other Christian can accomplish. I used to be intimidated by people who were more talented than I am. That was because I felt others would think less of me unless I could excel. I did not know my worth in life was not judged by God — nor by my true friends — based on what I accomplished. I am only judged on who I am.

Nor is my worth judged on how well someone else does something. That is not a true standard of measurement. There will always be someone who can do it better than you. You will never be the best at anything. And even if you become the single master of something, it will only be for a season. Ask golf pro Arnold Palmer, once the finest golfer in the world — but no longer. And the new king will soon be dethroned as well.

On the other hand, this realization is never an excuse for laziness. God equates laziness with wickedness. Each believer is commanded to pursue his or her role in the Kingdom of God with great diligence — not to surpass anyone else, but to please God. We are judged not only by the degree to which we use our talents, but by the degree that we make it possible for others to use

their talents also. When that is done, the Kingdom is satisfied.

### **5. The distribution of gifts is based upon each person's ability to manage.**

As we prove ourselves to be capable managers, we receive more. The reason we do not have more is often based on our unwillingness to manage what we do have. Thus it is important to note that the gifts were given to the servants "each according to his ability" to manage.

This is at the heart of Jesus' teaching. When we understand that, we can also understand the troublesome statement at the close of the parable: "For everyone who has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken away from him" (Matthew 25:29). In short: the distribution of the talents was based on each person's ability to manage them. As we prove ourselves capable managers, we receive more. If we do not manage what has been given us, we lose it.

Everybody has enough. But you will never receive more until you do what God wants you to do with what you have.

How easy it is to say, "If they would only let me," blaming "they" for our problems. "They" become the culprit. Yet in truth we are responsible for ourselves. If you want to be over a big ministry, I tell those frustrated "shepherds" in my congregation, then start with a tiny ministry. If you want to be known as a world-wide evangelist, start with your neighborhood. If you want to be blessed by God as a rich man, then use every penny you have to His glory — for the principle of true stewardship lies in the fact that God wants you to be a pipeline of His riches to others, not a purse for yourself.

For that reason I have become extremely careful of what I do with my money and my time. To blow my money on worthless entertainment, luxurious items with no more practical value than less expensive items, expensive meals which are far less nutritional than plain food, travel junkets and other time-wasters is to put myself in a position to hear God say, "Take the talent from him . . ."

I have been charged as a manager over my body, my time, my money, just as surely as those servants were charged to invest their talents for the master's glory. I am called to justify every expenditure by God's economy. That is good management.

### **6. The reward of work well done is more work to do.**

The two servants who did well were not told: "Now you can lean back, take your ease, eat, drink, and be merry." The master did not say, "Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful in a few things, now you can go into retirement." Instead, they were given greater tasks, greater responsibilities. The reward of work well done is not rest — it is more work.

Only the lazy retire. The people I hear saying, "I can hardly wait till retirement," are lazy people. They are lazy now. People do not retire and become lazy. Rather, retirement is proof of their basic laziness.

This does not mean you will not grow older and slow down. Of course you will. You may leave a job and go into something else. You may be forced out of your job because of your age or disability. But God's people never retire from Kingdom activity. No true minister of the Gospel can ever retire from ministry.

How do you lay down a mantle God has laid on you? You can't do it. It does not please God to burn your candle at both ends, but it is less pleasing to blow it out at age 65. As one man said, "I'd rather burn out than rust out."

A friend asked me what was a good time to retire. I told him, "About two weeks . . . then go back to work serving God."

The harder you work, the more responsibility you have. That is part of the whole management scheme Jesus is talking about. If you use what you have, and use it well, if you get



involved in whatever your hand finds to do and you do it with all your might, more doors will open. I know many who were retired from their jobs who are busier now, and far more productive now, than they ever were while they were shackled to their eight-hour-a-day task.

Work is not a curse. Work is a blessing. Happy is the person who answers the call to industriousness. Notice how the master in Jesus' parable equates work with God. "Come and share your master's happiness," the storyteller says of God. God is a busy God. Somehow we have gotten a picture of God lolling around heaven in a big hammock, fanned by angels and eating bon-bons. But He is not like that. He is a God of industry, a God of creativity, a God of work. His work did not stop on Friday night after He made this earth. Rather, after a Sabbath day rest, He cranked up again — just as He expects us to do. Laziness is the curse; work is the blessing. Thus, when we do our job well we are rewarded with more blessings.

For that reason, even though I am now convinced I should be keeping the Sabbath as a day of rest and relaxation, and should deliberately plan vacations and rest times for the sake of my mind, body, and spirit, I have struck the word "retirement" from my vocabulary. I plan to work right up until the time God calls me home. To do any less would place me out of God's will.

## **7. The man who is punished is the man who will not try.**

Although often used by the Old Testament prophets, only five times did Jesus use the word "wicked" to describe men. (Twice he spoke of a "wicked" generation and three times He used the word — sometimes translated evil — when describing the devil or his demons.) It's a harsh term of indisputable evil. Yet Jesus used it to describe the man who buried his talent in the ground. He equated it with laziness. He called him a "wicked and lazy servant," and said he would not only lose what had been given him, but he would be cast into the darkness where there would be "weeping and gnashing of teeth."

Why was this man punished so severely? Because he wouldn't try, wouldn't exercise his faith, wouldn't risk. Fear was the damning influence in his life. Even if he had ventured and lost, Jesus said, God would have blessed him. But to do absolutely nothing is to receive absolute condemnation.

At the close of a Sunday morning service in our church in Florida, I stepped down off the platform to the table where the communion elements were waiting. After saying a few words of explanation, stating that when we receive the bread and wine in communion, we are receiving Jesus, I asked those who were to serve the elements to the congregation to come forward. Their task was to pass the trays containing the bread and the little individual communion cups among the people.

As I handed the trays to the designated "servers," I looked up. Standing before me was a tough looking fellow with numerous tattoos on his arms. I had never seen him before; but he was there in the line of those waiting to pick up trays. Figuring he was someone who had been designated to serve and I just didn't know about it, I handed him two trays — one holding the broken matzo bread and the other the individual cups. He gave me a strange look, but took the trays and walked off with the other servers.

In a moment he was back, standing in front of me with the trays. "Which of these do I eat first?" he whispered.

I realized he was totally unfamiliar with our little tradition. I explained that most people ate the bread first, then drank from the cup.

"Should I do that now?" he asked, his nervous hands shaking as he held the trays.

"Why not?" I chuckled. I took the trays and offered him the elements. Gingerly, almost cautiously, he took first a piece of bread — then the cup. "You have just taken Jesus into your body," I smiled, trying to encourage him.

His eyes filled with tears. He was embarrassed and quickly returned to his seat

After the service was over I saw the same fellow coming toward me. Before I could move he

threw his arms around my shoulders and began weeping — loudly. I stood there and held him as he cried. In a few minutes I looked up and saw a woman standing with us.

“I’m his wife,” she said, her own eyes filled with tears. “He’s so embarrassed. He’s never been in a church service in his life. He has been on drugs and alcohol for years. This week he accepted Jesus as his Savior and asked to come to the service this morning. I told him there might be a time when he could come forward and say he had accepted Jesus. When you asked the servers to come forward, he thought that was the time. Then you handed him the communion trays and he was confused and embarrassed. He didn’t know what to do with them.”

I stepped back and looked the man in the face. His once-hardened features were soft with tears. “God loves you so much,” I smiled. “He saw you take that tiny step toward Him and was so overjoyed He placed in your hands the most precious thing the church has — the sacrament of the body and blood of His Son. Then He told you to go give Jesus to other people.”

“But I didn’t know what I was doing,” he wept.

“None of us know what we’re doing. We just obey — and God honors our obedience by blessing us with gifts. The only ones who receive nothing are those who do not step out. There is no ‘wrong time’ to accept Jesus.”

The call of God is always a call to risk.

### **8. Finally, and this is the universal rule of life: If a man has a gift and exercises it, God expands it so he can do even more. If he has a gift and fails to exercise it, he loses it.**

This is true of tennis, golf, singing, writing stories or thinking. If you stop thinking, you quickly lose the ability to think. If you stop playing golf and go out on the links 20 years later, you may still know the fundamentals. But when you start to play, you’ll discover the edge is gone.

That’s what happens when you don’t use what you have. The only way to keep a gift is to use it in the service of God and in the service of your fellow man.

In the book I wrote with Congressman/ astronaut Bill Nelson called *Mission: An American Congressman’s Adventure in Space*, I discovered a basic fact about the function of the human body in zero gravity. The human body is designed to function in an upright position in the gravity field of Earth’s environment. The moment the human body goes into zero gravity — either in earth orbit or on an extended space journey — the cells of that body begin to deteriorate. The reason: our bodies are constructed in such a way that exercise is mandatory for health and life. Muscles are designed to work against gravity. The cells of the body are designed to tug against the forces of gravity in what is best described as an isometric exercise. In short, exercise — even if it is nothing more than the heart pumping blood uphill — is necessary for health. Without gravity your cells grow listless, apathetic. Bed-ridden persons experience this to some degree. People living in zero gravity experience it to the ultimate.

Thus, in space the astronauts have discovered that some kind of isometric exercise is necessary to maintain health while there. On the space shuttle the astronauts use a treadmill for this purpose. Health and life come only through pushing and pulling. Muscles, cells which are not challenged — wither and die.

In short: use it or lose it.

For years I owned an Austrian violin, given me by an aunt who had purchased it in Vienna in 1912. No one had ever played it. When my aunt died a number of years ago, it was willed to me. She had thought one of my daughters might take up the violin. I had it cleaned, restrung, and bought a new bow for \$24. Then I put it back in the closet where it remained another 25 years.

During a house-cleaning expedition I discovered the old violin. But when I opened the case I found it had badly deteriorated. The gut strings were rotted. The bow, with the price tag still on it, was useless. The violin was covered with mold. The once beautiful finish was chipping.

The man at the music store who agreed to restore it shook his head. “The moment you put a

musical instrument on the shelf,” he said, “it begins to decay. This violin had but one purpose in life — to be played daily.”

Once restored, I gave the violin to our church so it can be played by those who have the ability but no instrument. For they, like the fiddle, will deteriorate unless they use their ability to God’s glory.

When I think about the judgment, I imagine that once it is established that by faith in Christ we have gained entrance into eternal life, there will be one more question all will have to account for: “What,” the Master will ask, “did you do with that which I gave you? What did you do with all those marvelous dreams you had? What did you do with all those gifts?”

When our answer is given, blessed is the person who hears in return: “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!”

**PRAYER:** Father, You have told us to “Come and share” in your happiness. I pray you would excite us and stimulate us and challenge us with your Holy Spirit. Make us unsatisfied with anything less than excellence — not excellence based on some outside standard, but excellence based on your Word that we might hear at the end of the line: “Well done, good and faithful servant.” Amen!