Basic Values for Serving God

Final in the series; Parables of Jesus on Money and Things

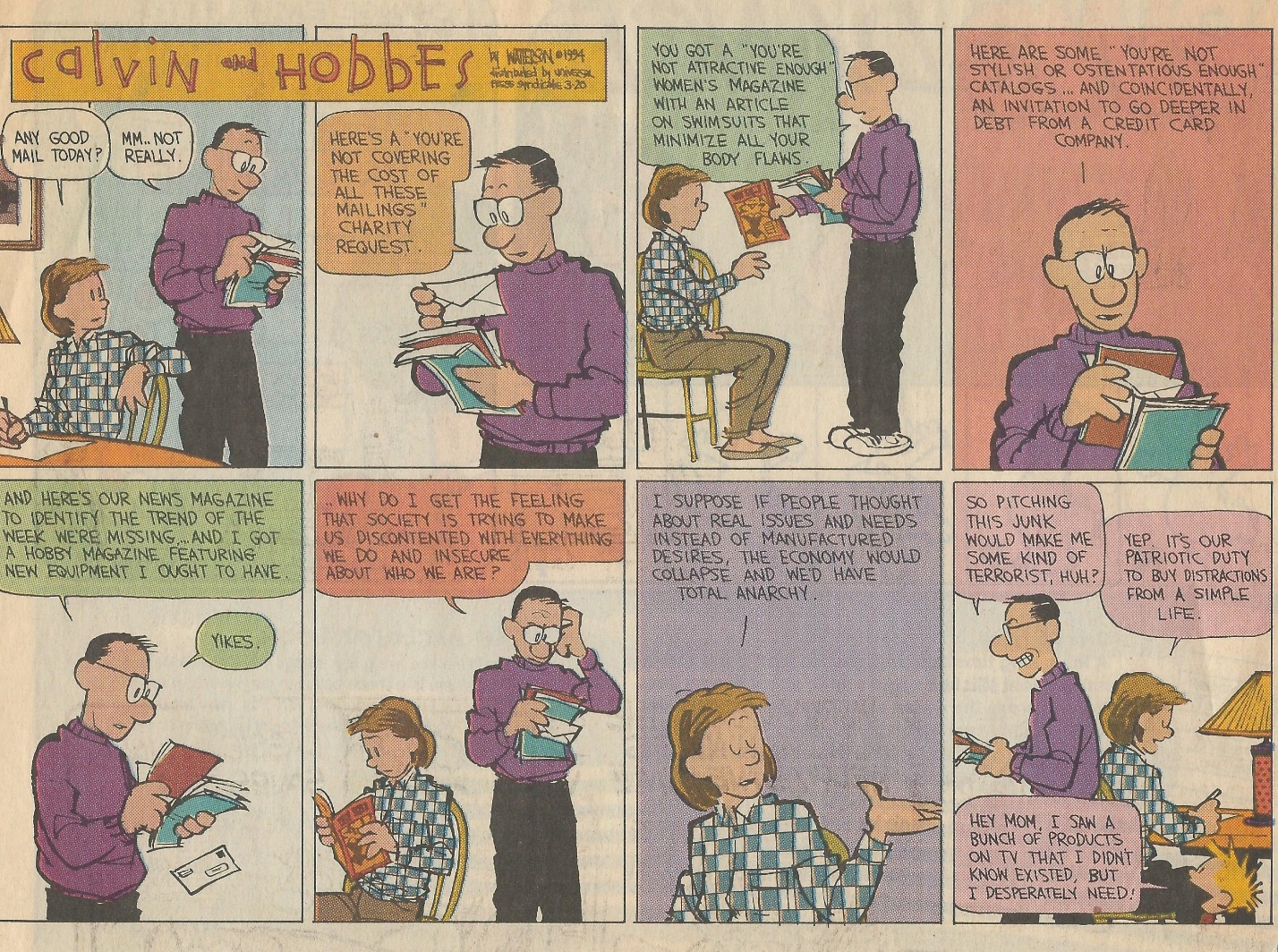
# Scripture: Matthew 25:14-30

# Key Thought: God wants us to use our abilities to serve Him.

# Intro:

## Our series

Calvin and Hobbes Cartoon on Things



Calvin’s Dad is looking for a better perspective on money and things. That’s what this series of messages has been about. Jesus told several parables to help us with exactly this issue.

This is the third in our series on Jesus’ Parables on Money and Things. This parable is commonly known as the Parable of the Talents, Talents being the traditional name for the gold or silver pieces which were the money over which the servants had oversight.

## The Bible setting

Jesus' teaching in Matthew 24, 25 was precipitated by Jesus' observation that the temple they were just leaving would one day be destroyed (Matt. 24:1,2). The disciples then asked the natural question as to when such terrible things would happen (Matt. 24:3). In their minds, the disciples were asking just one question. But, unknowingly, they asked several questions at once. When will the temple be destroyed? What are the signs of Jesus' second coming? What are the signs of the end of the age? Since the disciples asked it all as one question, Jesus answers it all as one question. After the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple which Herod had built by the Roman army in 70 AD, Christians realized that understanding Jesus' answer was not as simple as they thought.

At the end of chapter 24 Jesus is talking about the time of his return. Chapter 25 begins "At that time, the kingdom of heaven will be like…" The words “that time” refer to the time of the Son of Man's return which is mentioned just before this in Matthew 24:42-51. So, Jesus wanted his followers to think about what would happen when He returned to them. And the language of the parables should have given the disciples the idea that Jesus was preparing them for their Master to be away for an extended time.

The parable that we are studying today is set in a group of four parables that Jesus told at this time, all of which related to the faithfulness, preparedness, and accountability of the disciples when their Master returned. In short, we learn from these parables that God wants us to use our abilities to serve him and that someday he will check on those of us who are his followers to see how we have done. This teaching gives us a sense of individual responsibility before God as to how we live and how we use our money and things.

# Fair responsibility

## Why was the responsibility divided unevenly?

When we read the word “talent” we think of abilities. But that was not the original meaning of the Greek word used here or of the similar Latin word which is the basis for our English word “talent”. In the Greek and Roman world, the talent was a unit of money or of weight. We don’t know exactly how much money it was as commentators tell us the word could refer to either gold or silver coins. But commentators are agreed that each talent was likely more than a year’s wages. So, the servants were being put in charge of a large amount of money. Trusted servants of that day were really the business associates of their owners.

### Varying responsibilities reflected abilities

One of the first observations that I make in reading this parable is that the level of responsibility given to the different managers was quite different. One person had charge of five units of money, another received two and the third was put in charge of just one unit. The Scripture says plainly that the reason for the difference was the varying ability of the managers. The manager made a judgment based on the ability of the managers and made assignments accordingly. It is important to note that while the responsibility given was very different, there was no approbation or disapprobation related to the level of responsibility. It was just taken for fact that responsibility correlated naturally to the ability of the managers. As we interpret the parable remember that the master in the parable correlates to Jesus in the Kingdom of God.

### Varied responsibilities avoided overburdening

Another side of this idea of varying assignments is that the unequal distribution of responsibility avoids taxing people beyond their capabilities. The underlying implication is that God does not expect of us things of which we are not capable. This is common sense. If you can’t sing, don’t feel guilty that you can’t sing in choir. If you are not financially gifted, don’t feel guilty when others are giving thousands of dollars to a special project.

### Each expected top use their full abilities

But another facet of the idea is that God does expect us to use all our abilities. What did the Master want the three servants to do with the money? The likelihood is that considering the expected long absence of the Master, he anticipated that the servants would do business with the money. And those with greater gifts were expected to use them.

From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded. Luke 12:48 NIV

In our lives, the challenges God sends our way will require all our abilities. God will not be satisfied for us to sit back with a five-talent ability and cruise through using only one-talent ability. God does not like sand-bagging. He wants us to use our abilities in helping others and in advancing His kingdom. That is completely obvious in the severe judgement given to the man with the one talent. The third servant did not use the ability that he had. Though he did not have as much ability as the other two, he was still responsible for his own assignment and he did not pass the test of faithful diligence.

## Why did servant three not pass the test?

* Fear  
  The man who was given only one talent confessed that he was fearful. He was frozen into inaction by fear. He said the problem was fear of the Master, but one wonders whether it was really fear of failure that was the issue. Whichever it was, may it not be so of us. God does not want us frozen into inaction by fear! I think Timothy must have been the kind of person who could have been frozen by fear, so Paul wrote to him specifically addressing the danger.

For God has not given us a spirit of fearfulness, but one of power, love, and sound judgment. 2 Tim 1:7 (Holman Christian Standard Bible)

Sometimes we need to step out of our comfort zone to take a risk to accomplish what Jesus is calling us to do.

* Found an easy way

The Bible says that this third servant went out and buried the money he had received. His rationale was that it would be safe that way. Maybe so. But perhaps it seemed like the easiest way out. Obviously, upon his return, the Master was not happy with this servant’s choice of the way of least resistance. The Master suggested that at least he could have given the money to bankers who would have paid interest. But then, the master’s suggestion would have required some effort, investigation, and follow-up perhaps as well.

* Failure to accept the challenge

The way the third servant chose did not have an eye for increasing results. It was a way that did not accept the challenge of the Master to do business with the money and make it work for him just as he would have done if he had not gone away.

## Our Challenge

Do you remember those WWJD bracelets that people wore for a while? The idea was that whenever we faced a choice we were to ask ourselves, “What would Jesus do?” We really need to apply the idea behind those bracelets more widely. After his resurrection, Jesus commissioned his disciples with the words,

“Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.” John 20:21 NIV

Jesus has sent us to be his hands and feet, his eyes and ears, and his heart of compassion in this troubled world. We are to use our money and things, our abilities and words as agents for Jesus. Paul called us his ambassadors (2 Cor. 5:20). Jesus called us “friends” who know the master’s business and have been chosen to produce results for our Master.

You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master’s business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last—and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you. John 15:14-16 NIV

The question to ask ourselves is whether we are using the abilities and opportunities that God has given us. What will the Master say about the use of our money? About the uses we are making of our time? Are we using our abilities to help God’s kingdom and others? Would we be found, heaven forbid, to be just spending our energy on ourselves and our advancement? Would any of us be sand-bagging—skating through using only a fraction of the potential that God has given us? Those are the kinds of questions this parable raises. They may be uncomfortable but better to raise them now than to have them raised by the one to whom we will all one day give account.

# Faithful diligence

Finally, it is important to note exactly what is rewarded by the Master.

A key lesson for us is that our master's approval was most highly correlated with faithful diligence, not with underlying ability or with raw results. The master recognized results but it was the faithful service or lack of it that was key. Despite differing abilities and differing raw results, the first and second servants received the same reward because their faithful diligence was the same. The third servant was not punished for lack of ability but for lack of faithful diligence. As the OT pronounced:

"The Lord rewards everyone for their righteousness and faithfulness" 1 Sam. 26:23

God knows that the bottom line results are not always in our control. There are so many other circumstances beyond our control that affect results in any endeavor. This is no excuse to fail to try. But we need to recognize that God knows that equal ability and seeming equal opportunity will often produce different results.

For example, in the parable of the soils, when Jesus speaks of the good soil, which all of us should strive to be, he mentions that some good soil produces 100 times what was sown, some sixty times what was sown and some thirty times. Again, in that parable there is no disapproval of the differences in ratios. It is recognized that good soil produces fruit, but not always in the same proportion.

What God expected in the servants in today’s parable was faithful diligence. Each servant was expected to use their ability and do as well as was possible. Jesus expects fruit-bearing and recognizes fruit-bearing. He expects good soil to produce a crop. But he just doesn’t require us all to be equal in fruit-bearing. The premium is on faithful diligence.

Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful.   
1 Cor 4:2

# Fearful accountability

## A four-fold repetition

There is one more very important aspect of this parable that we need to note. This parable is found in a larger context which deals with the readiness and service of God's servants. The key idea for the whole section is found in Matthew 24:42. It functions as both a concluding idea for what preceded and a key thought for the supporting parables which follow it.

“Therefore, keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come.”

There are four similar parables and stories in this section of Matthew. All are about service to God and others. Our service or good works mentioned in the four parables are of different types:

* Serving God's household -feeding other servants . Matt 24:45-51
* Readiness while waiting for the bridegroom. Matt 25:1-13
* Financial stewardship. Matt. 25:14-30
* Helping those in need (Sheep and goats) Matt. 25:31-46

Yet there are key common elements in all four stories.

## The Master is Jesus

First, it is important to identify all the titles in all four teachings with Jesus: In the key verse, “your Lord” 24:42; in the first parable, “the master” 24:45; in the second parable, “the bridegroom” 25:5; in the third parable, “the master of those servants” 25:19; and in the final teaching, two titles, “Son of Man” 25:31 and “King” 25:34. All these terms point to Jesus himself.

## The Master is Away and will return

Second, in all four instances the Master (Bridegroom, Son of Man) is away and will return after a long delay.

## Accountability is a common thread

Third, when he does, a moment of reckoning occurs for the servants. In the first story, the servant who is assigned to care for other servants is either found faithful at the time of the master’s return or he is found negligent. In the second story, the metaphor is changed to that of wedding attendants waiting for the bridegroom. When the bridegroom returns, the attendants are either found ready or not ready. The third parable is our parable for today. The Master is returning after a long time away and will ask for a report from the servants that he has left in charge of his assets. They are judged on their faithfulness and diligence to their charge. The fourth picture specifically says it is for, “When the Son of Man comes in his glory.” “Son of Man” was Jesus’ favorite name for himself. When Jesus returns he will be the King calling us, his people, to give account for how we have treated those in need using the abilities, time and resources with which he has gifted us.

Accountability is a common thread of all four teachings of Jesus. He himself will someday hold us accountable for our assigned responsibilities. We are accountable to God for how we use our time, our abilities, our money and our stuff. And Jesus will ask about it.

## A Consequence to be Feared

### Third servant is punished

There is a final common element to note. In today’s parable, our modern sensitivities might be a little put off by the gravity of the judgment against the unfaithful servant, the one who did nothing with his responsibility. After all, we say, he didn’t steal it. But our standards are so low. Just in case we are tempted to try to gloss over this part of the parable, we need to note that this severe consequence is a key element in what is repeated in all four of the stories and parables in this section. That means the dangerous consequence of negligence is precisely a key part of the truth Jesus is trying to drive home!

In all four of the parables and descriptions that Jesus gives, the consequence of failing the test of faithfulness and responsibility before God is the same and it is dreadful! It is a consequence to be feared indeed!

### Consequence of failure in all four parables was separation from the Master

In all four instances, the penalty for lack of diligence in service is the same - separation from the Master! Two of the parables describe the punishment as "outside." Two describe it as a place of "weeping and gnashing of teeth," a graphic description of the severest regret. The fourth teaching uses the phrase “depart from me” and gives the destination of those who fail the test of faithful service as "eternal punishment" (Matthew 25:41, 46).

# Conclusion

Our take-home is that it is crucial for us to be faithful and diligent in our discipleship. And this discipleship includes the use of our money and things in ways that are appropriate for agents and ambassadors of Jesus Christ. Use the talents that you possess. Remember, “The woods would be silent if the only birds that sang were those that sing the best.” Each person’s contribution to the whole is needed.