

The Heart of the Matter

Lesson 12: The Christian's Attitude Toward Spiritual Responsibility

1. A Parable

In the parable of the talents (Matt. 25:14-30), Jesus challenges each Christian to accept responsibility for the God-given resources at his disposal. Several points are worthy of notice:

1) The master distributed his property to the servants. That is, they were *stewards* of his money. He *owned* it; they *used* it. So it is with our abilities to serve God.

2) The master distributed talents "*to each according to his own ability.*" He took into account the relative abilities of his servants and endowed them accordingly. This shows a fundamental sense of fairness; he expected profit commensurate with his servants' abilities.

3) The master had not outlined a business plan; therefore, the servants had to exercise initiative to make a profit with the money. One, of course, did not exercise that initiative and was a failure.

4) The master expected something more than his original investment to be returned. The slothful servant who was given "only" one talent (that was still *a lot* of money, perhaps 20-30 years wages) was punished for returning the original sum without loss.

How does this apply today? The principles are clear enough. Each of us has been created with "talents" (intellect, money, personality, etc.) that have potential usefulness to God. We are only responsible for the abilities *we* possess; faithfulness to God is not a "competition" with others. We must, however, exercise

initiative in order to put these talents to use. God may open doors and create opportunities, but He will not force us to act. We must recognize the opportunity, respond to it and work to achieve the result God desires.

Further, we must work to hone the latent, undeveloped skills that lie within. I am convinced that most Christians have tremendous stores of talent and skill buried beneath a pile of distraction, insecurity and fear. We find excuses that seem reasonable to us, that don't arouse an offended conscience, and we trot them out whenever obligation comes calling.

Jesus demonstrates very clearly in this parable that, while we may get away with such shenanigans in this life, a day of reckoning is coming. The master, after being long absent, will return and demand an accounting for what we did with what we were given.

"For to everyone who has, more will be given, and he will have abundance; but from him who does not have, even what he has will be taken away. And cast the unprofitable servant into the outer darkness. There will be weeping gnashing of teeth" (Matt. 25:29-30).

2. Leadership Responsibility

While there is an endless variety of ways to serve God for men and women, young and old, novice and experienced, the need always exists for some to step forward and take the reins of leadership. Any group of people trying to function as a unit (such as a local church) needs guidance, direction, planning and

exhortation. As individuals we each have our will, opinions, weaknesses and other foibles that may threaten the cohesiveness of the group. Good leadership helps moderate those tendencies and maximize the resources that would benefit the community.

God's present method of communication, unlike certain times in ancient history, is indefinite. That is, He issues general commands and expressions of will and leaves the implementation on a voluntary basis. For example, the NT speaks at length upon the need and value of evangelists, but there is no issuance of direct calls to individuals. Each man must examine himself in all honesty and evaluate his traits and abilities and ask:

1) Is this a work for which God has adequately equipped me? Do I have latent skills that could be developed and used?

2) Do I have acceptable reasons for not using these abilities more so than I do?

3) Am I both talented and motivated enough to make preaching my vocation? Is there potential benefit to the kingdom that I am wasting because I am reluctant to employ my God-given talent?

This is a process that must be engaged in between a man, his conscience and his Maker. The questions that need to be answered can only be answered by each person. It is not a matter of arm-twisting or manipulating with guilt, for service on such a flimsy basis is vain. The same process holds for potential elders, deacons, teachers and others. Christians must constantly ask, "What *more* can I do for the Lord?" and not "How *little* can I do and still slide by?"

3. First, A Willingness

One of the most inspiring examples of taking responsibility to serve God is that of the brethren in Macedonia (2 Cor. 8-9). While the contribution for the Jewish was voluntary, the Macedonians gave till it hurt:

*"... in a great trial of affliction the abundance of their joy and their deep poverty abounded in the riches of their liberality ... beyond their ability, they were freely willing ... And this they did ... but first **gave themselves to the Lord ...**"*
(2 Cor. 8:2-3, 5).

Paul notes the heart of serving God: "*For if there is first a willing mind, it is accepted according to what one has, and not according to what he does not have*" (2 Cor. 8:12).

It is the willing mind that gives generously, without lamenting of the hardships brought upon the benefactor:

"But this I say: He who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. So let each one give as he purposes in his heart, not grudgingly or of necessity; for God loves a cheerful giver" (2 Cor. 9:6-7).

While this specific context is in reference to financial support, the underlying principles apply to all acts of service to God. Our faith must be of sufficient stature and character that we look for ways to serve rather than reasons not to serve. This takes initiative and desire.

4. Avoiding Evil Not Enough

Some evaluate themselves morally and spiritually from the standpoint of what they have *not* done: I'm OK because I haven't killed, raped, stolen, lied, etc. But there is no virtue in merely not being guilty of heinous crimes; Jesus' death

atoned for even the “small” transgressions. Thus we are indebted to Him for delivering us from all violations of divine law, and we owe Him a life of service in return for the promise of eternal life.

Jesus was morally perfect yet did not distance Himself from those around Him who were suffering as a consequence of their own error and that of others. We live in a world where heartache, fear, debilitation, violence and other maladies plague our friends, neighbors and family. We cannot turn a blind eye to this and just immerse ourselves in our own interests.

Our knowledge and insight as Christians obligates us to accept personal responsibility as we have opportunity. God works in this world providentially, and sometimes that providence is enacted through His people, people attuned to the evil wrought by sin, to the spiritual deficiency of the world, to the eternal emptiness and suffering that awaits those who live in rebellion to God. Spiritually mature people will look for ways to serve; they will shoulder the load for Christ. It is the least we can do in recognition of what He has done for us.

Questions for Discussion

1. Discuss possible reasons why one would desire to serve as an elder (1 Tim. 3:1).
2. Discuss Jas 4:17 in reference to exercising spiritual responsibility.
3. Describe the element of spiritual responsibility in these passages: Gal. 6:1-2; Jas. 5:19-20; Jude 22-23; Phil. 2:4.
4. What traits of Nehemiah (Neh. 1:4; 2:5, 12), Hezekiah (2 Chr. 29:1-10) and Josiah (2 Chr. 34:19-21, 26-28) made them great leaders?
5. Discuss some practical ways in which Christians can help each other grow in reference to spiritual responsibilities.