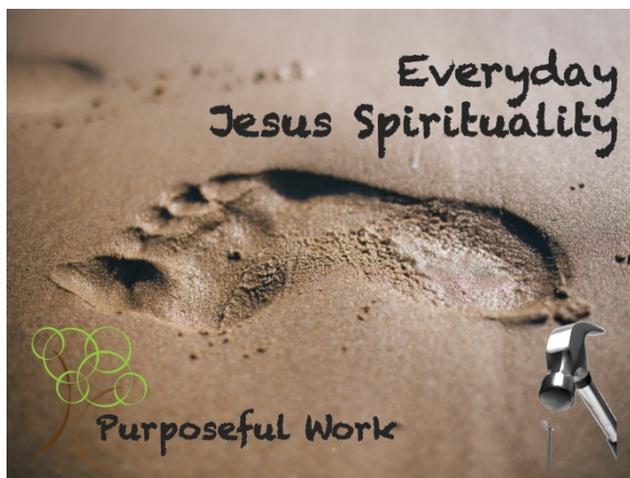


## The Spiritual Discipline of Purposeful Work; Everyday Jesus Spirituality

Matthew 25:14-30

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A while back, I went to a workshop at a preaching conference about preaching by the VERBS of a story. We were encouraged to look at any story of Scripture and really focus in, not on the nouns – the things in the passage – but on the verbs – the actions in the passage. The presenter talked about how caught up we can get in the nouns and trying to take the nouns of the passage into today and how unnecessarily preoccupied we can get with those nouns. What kind of fruit grew on the tree of the knowledge of good and evil? Is a mustard seed really the smallest of all the seeds? What is a ‘talent’ anyway? Now, it’s not that nouns and things aren’t important, but verbs just translate so easily from one generation to the next – from one culture to the next. And so, in this message about the discipline of *work*, it seems quite appropriate to consider the verbs – the action words – of this passage.

The first several verbs are all verbs that the wealthy man does. He’s about to *go* on a journey, and so he *calls* his servants, and *entrusts* his wealth to them, *giving* five bags of gold or talents to one, two to another, and one to a third. And then he *goes*.

If we can simply agree together that the wealthy man represents God in this parable, we can see how fully this story begins with God’s grace. Well, actually, I wrote that sentence in this message and I had to back up... the story really begins with the anticipated absence of God. It will be like a man *going* on a journey. The story begins with the anticipation of God’s absence.

God's absence will be a backdrop for much of this story. Just as the wealthy man left a space for his servants to do things in his absence, so God leaves space for us to do things.

So, the man is *going* on a journey and so he *calls* his servants and *entrusts* his wealth to them, by *giving* them each portions. Calling and entrusting and giving. So also, God with us. God calls, entrusts, and gives. *What* God gives and exactly *how much* and *to whom* is a little beside the point. If these three servants represent all of us, we can say that we have all been called and we have all been gifted. I love what Dale Bruner says, "A talent is any opportunity at all... and this includes many realities: work, family, play, community, and even interruptions. A talent is whatever the Lord gives now and will ask about later" (*Matthew, A Commentary*, p. 554). The point is that the Lord gives it and because he has entrusted it to us for stewarding, we know that the Lord will ask about it later.

And what do all the servants then do? The servants all *receive*. Whatever happens next there is first the reception of what has been given. And they have been given a lot... One talent is worth a lifetime of wages... so the first servant – five lifetimes... the second servant, two... and the third servant, no less than a lifetime of wages.

And now we will consider the action words – the verbs – of the servants. I want to begin, actually with the third servant, the one who received one bag of gold. Look at the words used to describe what he did with the bag of gold... Again, these are telling words... That servant *went off*, *dug* a hole in the ground, and *hid* his master's money. *Went off* (talk about how this word, in the Greek, is more about withdrawing...). *Dug*. *Hid*.

The fascinating thing that I learned in my reading is that Jesus and Matthew may have been referring to actions of particular groups of people here... not just poor investors or lazy servants... It could be that there is a critique going on here of the Qumran community. This was a community of Jewish people who *went off*, *dug* caves, and *hid* from the world. OR this could have been a critique of the Pharisees insofar as they *went off* (separating themselves from others), *dug* holes by living lives encased in rules and regulations, and *hid*, by making sure they were not contaminated by sinners. OR, this could have been a critique of Israel in general, insofar as they had been called and blessed with the mandate to bless the nations, and they had not passed this blessing along.

Whatever the case, these verbs should get us thinking about the ways that we go off/withdraw, dig holes, and hide what has been entrusted to us. (Actually give people a few minutes to think about this and then have volunteers share thoughts with the congregation – One person shared about just wanting to hide in bed. Another shared about Dutch immigrant communities in the 50s, sealing themselves off from the rest of the world.)

And then... at the end of the parable, we get the servant's justification of himself. The servant basically pins his behaviour first on the character of the Master. This is really all about who you are. You are a hard man. You get what you want where you want it. Who am I in the face of your ways? What could I do, really, with what you had given me, that you could not have done yourself?

This, if you look closely, is a pretty sophisticated argument. When we think about God and God's sovereignty and God's omnipotence, what does it even matter what we do or don't do with the things that we have been given? In the grand scheme of things, as long as we don't lose those gifts, isn't that enough?

Well, not according to this parable. That kind of justification is cover for laziness. Bruner says, "According to the Lord, the servant's whole theology of God's greatness was one massive cover for laziness. The servant did nothing, not *really* because he believed in a God who needs nothing, but because he wanted to do nothing" (Ibid, p. 561).

And underneath that laziness is one more verb that we must name because it translates very quickly to our lives. Why did the servant go off, dig a hole, and hide the gold? He *was afraid*. He was afraid. He didn't want to take the risk. And isn't that the truth behind the our going off? Our digging? Our hiding? Isn't there some fear there? Fear that if we risk doing anything else with what we have been given, we will somehow lose it... or lose our own safety or comfort?

Well, these holes we dig and hide in might be cozy and warm for a while, but eventually, they are just dark. And sad. And lonely. And so boring there's nothing left to do but grind your teeth.

In contrast to this – we have the first two servants and their verbs. What did they do with the call, the entrustment, the gift? They *went* at once (different Greek verb!). They *put* the

money to *work*. And they *gained* more. This is the joy of the gospel! The movement of the kingdom! The radical trust and obedience that follows the gifts that we have been given.

I think of Bartimaeus from our story last week... Jesus called him – and he immediately came! Jesus asked him what he wanted him to do for him – and he answered! Jesus healed him and he immediately followed Jesus. Maybe you can think of other places and people in Scripture where these verbs come alive. Or maybe you can think of examples in your own life... times that you had received a gift – an opportunity – and you just joyfully ran with it... put it to work... and watched the multiplication happen. (Give them some time to think about that... and then ask for volunteers to share... One shared about how their husband receives promptings from the spirit to connect with people and then just visits them right then. Another talked about our Loaves and Fishes ministry. Still another mentioned inviting a lonely neighbour over for dinner. We responded to each – This is the joy of the Lord; Thanks be to God!)

When the master returned, these two servants showed him what they had done with they had been entrusted with – and in both cases (didn't matter how much they had to begin with – same with the 5 and the 2), the master says exactly the same thing. There is first the praise – Well done, good and faithful servant! You have *been faithful* and so I will now *put you in charge* of more. *Come* and *share* your master's *happiness*. Let's just break that down:

You've been faithful. The acknowledgement of their faithfulness is the key thing that they are commended for. Bruner says, "The words 'good and faithful' do not commend mere doctrinal correctness ...; they honour 'active responsibility that takes initiative and risk'" (Ibid., p. 557-8). There is something about the adjective faithful that implies verbs of doing... When you are faithful, you do what you said you were going to do. It's not just about what we *think* and what we *believe*. The Christian life and the Christian hope is also about what we do, in light of what we believe. Barbara Brown Taylor writes:

When people wanted [Jesus] to tell them what Gods' realm was like, he told them stories about their own lives. When people wanted him to tell them God's truth about something, he asked them what they thought. With all kinds of opportunities to tell people what to think, he told them what to do instead. Wash feet. Give your stuff away. Share your food. Favour reprobates. Pray for those who are out to get you. Be the first to say, "I'm sorry." (*Altar in the World*, p. 118-9).

So, they had *been faithful*. And the master says, now, I'm going to reward you. I am going to put you in charge of more things. I love it! The reward for faithful work... is faithful work! The third servant would probably be like, See! That's exactly what I was afraid of! But the first two servants are like, YES! BRING IT ON! "Heavenly rewards are not beds of rest; they are posts of duty." (Bruner, *Ibid.*, p. 558).

And finally, the master says, "*Come share* the master's happiness." This is the true reward... coming to him ... and *sharing* with him and with one another. And I think those first two servants probably looked at each other and laughed and said, "We already are!" Because there's something about the work that God calls us to that is about working *together* and *sharing* from the get-go... And there is JOY in it. There is joy in discerning what gifts you have been given – and joy in putting them to work – and joy in seeing how they fit with other people's gifts.

So, the question is, What are you doing with what you have been given? And I'm not just talking about the big things, like education or your salary... I'm talking about any little opportunity that comes your way. How are you stewarding it?

I know that dear Sister Anne once said that every day she tried to do something for the Lord. What a witness... How much you have been given and what you have compared to others is quite beside the point. What matters is that you receive it and engage it for the master. Whatever you do, whether in word or in deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father, through him (Colossians 3:17).