

Two Kinds of Ambition

As we continue our look at the parable of the talents, Matthew 25:14-30 gives some very important principles as to how we're to live our lives in light of the certain return of Jesus Christ. In my last article we considered the reality that Christians can very often be self-focused rather than God-focused. With this thought of being God-focused in mind, I was reminded of a classic novel, "The Brothers Karamazov" by Russian author Fyodor Dostoevsky who is credited with writing, "If there is no God....then everything is permitted." In reality, all people know that there is a God (Romans 1:19-20; 2:14-16) even though many are adept at suppressing that knowledge (Romans 1:18). Since there is a God, everything that we might want for ourselves is not necessarily permitted. As Christians, we may need to refocus our lives away from putting the priority on ourselves and look toward the needs of others (Mt. 22:34-40).

Last time I noted that each of the three servants in this parable was given differing amounts of talents. This shows that our responsibility is connected to how we use the gifts and opportunities that God has given us rather than comparing ourselves to others and what they're doing. Let's move on now from The Responsibility of the Servants to:

—The Return of the Master

"Now after a long time the master of those servants came and settled accounts with them." (25:19) I want to look now at verses 20-23 under the sub heading:

—Praise and Promise for the Faithful

These verses follow, generally, the same pattern. The Master comes to settle accounts—the one who has received five talents shows that he has made good use of what was given him. He then hears the Master say, "Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your Master." One New Testament scholar has noted that "good and faithful" is an expression of approval for both the servant's character as well as his diligence. In the previous parables from this section there's a teaching of Jesus that we must ever be "watchful" as we await his return. This is a reminder that we can often be tempted away from proper diligence in our consideration of others if we're not seeking to live as if the Master could return at any time.

The fact that we need to be watchful for Christ's return reminds me of an old fable I once read that told of three apprentice devils who were talking to Satan. The first one said, "I will tell people there is no God." Satan replies, "That will not fool many, because they know there is a God." The second said, "I will tell people there is no Hell." Satan replies to the second apprentice, "You will never fool many that way, because they know there is a Hell." The third apprentice said, "I will tell people there is no hurry." Satan approvingly replies, "Go and you will ruin millions."

Going back to our text we see much the same thing happening to the second servant as happened to the first. He has diligently worked with the two talents that he's been given and receives the same praise and promise. When the Master states the promise, "You have been

faithful over a little; I will set you over much,” this is not to say that the promise will happen only after Jesus returns. God blesses our obedient service in this life with more opportunities for service which brings more blessing and joy! It’s important for us to remember, though, that whatever we’ve been given belongs to God. We’re stewards and as stewards we bear a responsibility to rightly use the gifts that we’ve been graciously given. Let’s move on now to:

—Punishment and Promise for the Slothful

In verses 24-27 we notice immediately that the third servant did not work at all but rather, “buried his talent in the ground.” He also misjudges the Master calling him a “hard man” and other false accusations. This servant obviously doesn’t know the Master at all and is operating out of fear of punishment rather than love of the Master. In reality, this servant is self-focused and lazy! He is clearly not interested in rightly using the gifts that he’s been given but rather he gives us a picture of living life for oneself. Christian statesman John Stott once wrote, “In the end, just as there are only two kinds of piety the self-centered and the God-centered, so there are only two kinds of ambition: one can be ambitious for oneself or for God. There is no third alternative.”

Rev. Dr. Steve Jones is the pastor of Westminster Presbyterian Church PCA in Paxton, Illinois.