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Your Abilities are Kingdom Responsibilities

Matthew 25:14-30

2011 Time, Talent, Treasure Series

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Some of you may know I did my doctoral work in the discipline of philosophy and one of my specialties was in ethics. One of the things, as I studied ethics and ethical theory that always intrigued me and still does to this day, was that several of the important thinkers in the history of ethics believe that we have a moral responsibility to use and improve our talents and abilities. Such prominent thinkers as the 18th century philosopher Immanuel Kant and the 20th century British philosopher W.D. Ross put forth this idea along with all the other basic fundamental ethical principles that we have—principles such as doing justice and being honest and doing no harm to others, helping others. And among all of that was this apparently odd principle that we have a moral obligation to improve upon and use the abilities, the talents, that we have. When I would raise that issue with the students in the ethics classes that I would teach, I typically got a response of bewilderment. This was the silliest thing anybody could ever think of. You know certainly it would be nice if someone were to develop and use his or her talents and abilities but to say it's required, to actually suggest that one would be unethical or immoral because he or she did not use and develop his or her talents, that was just absurd they thought. Maybe upon hearing that, you thought that sounds somewhat silly too. I mean all those important things like not harming others, doing justice, but to have that as a moral requirement? I just so happen to think that Kant and Ross had it just right—that we do have a moral responsibility to use and to develop our talents and our abilities.

But does the Bible give us any guidance on that? What does the Bible say? Is it the case that a third grade teacher or a university professor has a moral obligation to improve and to use his or her teaching abilities, their expertise in their field of study? What about the professional landscaper or even the weekend gardener who has a green thumb—that knack for dealing with plants? Does that person have a moral responsibility to develop and use those talents? What about the artist? Does he or she have a moral duty to use his or her talents? And the list goes on and on. I coach a sixth grade girls' soccer team. As a coach, do I have an ethical duty to continue to use and improve upon whatever coaching abilities I might have? Of course after yesterday's game that might be called into question. (laughter) What about my players? Do they have a moral responsibility to use and improve upon their talents?

This week is the second week in a three-part series we are doing here—investigating, looking at the resources and our stewarding of the resources that God has given us in the areas of time, talent and treasure. Of course this week is talent as you probably figured out by now. We want to consider that this morning. My hope is that you will leave here today with the understanding that your abilities, your talents, are not just nice optional things that you might happen to dabble in, enjoy and do, but that you have a responsibility as an image bearer of God and, if you are a follower of Jesus, as a worker in God's kingdom, to continue to use and develop those talents and those gifts that God has entrusted to you.

Though I agree with Kant and Ross and others like them that believe that we have this ethical responsibility, I believe they miss something very important. The very thing that grounds that responsibility that we have to use and develop our talents is the fact that we are an image-bearer of

God. That's what it means to be human, to be image-bearers of God. But what does that mean? What does it mean to be an image-bearer of God? We throw that term around quite a bit—that we are image-bearers—but what exactly does it mean? Although we don't have the time to do it this morning, I think that a careful look at the relevant passages will show us that an image-bearer of God—to be an image-bearer of God—means that we have been given the ability by God to represent Him both as a picture, and as an agent. I've been given, as an image-bearer of God, the abilities and the capacities and so forth to give a picture of who God is. That was one of God's intents for creating humans that, when we look at each other, we should be reminded of who God is. Of course since The Fall, we don't all do that very well, but that was the intent. We have that ability to give a picture of who God is. But we've also been given the abilities and capacities that we have so that we can represent God in the sense of acting for Him, being His agent on earth, to accomplish His plans and purposes. I think that's what it means to be an image-bearer and the abilities that I have—including my talents, my abilities, capacities, and skills to do things—are part of what allows me, as an image-bearer, to give a good picture of who God is and to work for Him and for His plans and purposes.

But with any ability that one is given, comes a responsibility. So it's not just the fact that we have this ability to represent God. God means for us to use that and we are responsible for representing Him well—giving a clear picture of who He is—but also being involved in the things that concern Him in this earth. There's an ethical responsibility involved in our image-bearing and I think that's what ultimately grounds this moral requirement that we have. But beyond that, beyond our image-bearing, which certainly applies to all human beings if you are a follower of Jesus, if you have been rescued from the kingdom of darkness and are brought into His kingdom of light, your abilities and talents take on even more ethical significance, because now you are working for the kingdom. You are working for kingdom purposes and God has given you resources for those purposes. And that's what I want us to consider this morning: What does King Jesus expect of His subjects in His kingdom with regards to the resources He has given them, particularly our talents and our abilities.

Take your Bible and turn with me to the Gospel of Matthew, Chapter 25. In Matthew 24 and 25 we have a sermon by Jesus; we often called this the Olivet Discourse. Jesus preaches this sermon in response to some questions that His disciples raise early on in Chapter 24. One of those questions is, "When is Your return going to be? When are You going to come back?" And a good part of this sermon addresses that question that the disciples had. And in addressing that question, Jesus comprises His sermon of several parables to teach the lessons He wants His disciples to learn concerning the time of His coming. Jesus' point here is trying to convince them, or teach them, that His return is something that is unexpected. Nobody knows when it is going to happen, but in the meantime, they should be about kingdom business.

The first parable that Jesus tells, if you look back at Chapter 24 for just a second, in verses 43 and 44, this parable is a story about a robber who comes at night. The point is that Jesus' coming is completely unexpected, like that robber at night. You don't know when that person is going to show up; so, too, is Jesus' coming. It's unexpected; nobody knows when it's going to happen.

He then follows that parable up with the second parable, a parable of the faithful and unfaithful servants in Chapter 24, verses 45 to 51. The story of the master who goes off, leaves his servants in charge and he comes back sooner than they expect. Jesus' point here is that His coming might be sooner than we expect and we don't know when it is, but it's going to be sooner than many people expect it to be and we don't want to be caught off-guard.

Then in Chapter 25 Jesus tells the third parable—the parable of the ten virgins—where His point is that His return is something that might come later than one expects. The previous parable suggests that Jesus' return might come sooner than one expects. Now the parable of the ten virgins suggests Jesus' coming might be later than one expects—that people are simply not prepared for a lengthy time before Jesus returns. And that seems to obviously exhaust all the options. In another words this is completely unexpected. Of course—this is a side note—if many Christians and many celebrity preachers would take heed of Jesus' advice that no one knows when this is going to happen, maybe Christianity wouldn't have such a bad name at times. But what we do with that in light of the fact that we don't know when Jesus returns, really begs the question, "Then what are people in the kingdom supposed to be doing? What are we to be about?"

The next parable, the one we want to look at briefly this morning in Chapter 25, verses 14 through the end of the chapter, addresses and answers that question. In light of the fact that we don't know when Jesus' return is going to be, it might be very soon, it might be decades, millennia away, how are we going to be living our lives? Jesus said the way the disciple, the way the kingdom subject, is to live his or her life is by using the resources that God has given for kingdom purposes. Let's look at this parable. Sometimes this is called the *Parable of the Talents*. And by *talent* here, this doesn't mean an ability; this was actually a monetary unit in the first century Roman world that would be equivalent to about twenty years of wages for a day laborer. Jesus tells this parable to answer this question, "Then what should a disciple be doing?" Verse 14:

> **"Again, it will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted his wealth to them."** (*NIV, Matthew 25:14)

Stop here just a minute. What does the **it** there refer to? Well, it's the kingdom of God. Jesus is telling these parables illustrating the kingdom of God and what life in the kingdom is like, so...

> **"Again, it** [the kingdom of God] **will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted his wealth to them. To one he gave five bags of gold, to another two bags, and to another one bag, each according to his ability. Then he went on his journey. The man who had received the five bags of gold went at once and put his money to work and gained five bags more. So also, the one with two bags of gold gained two more. But the man who had received one bag went off, dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money."** (Vs.14-18)

So this story is fairly clear: master's leaving and gives his resources to his servants for them to use for the purposes that he intended. And we see how these three servants responded. Continue in verse 19:

> **"After a long time the master of those servants returned and settled accounts with them. The man who had received five bags of gold brought another five. 'Master,' he said, 'you entrusted me with five bags of gold. See, I have gained five more.' "His master replied, '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!'**
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> **"The man with two bags of gold also came, 'Master,' "he said," 'you entrusted me with two bags of gold; see, I have gained two more.' "His master replied, '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!'

"Then the man who had received one bag of gold came. 'Master,' he said, 'I knew that you are a hard man, harvesting where you have not sown and gathering where you have not scattered seed. So I was afraid and went out and hid your gold in the ground. See, here is what belongs to you.' "His master replied, 'You wicked, lazy servant! So you knew that I harvest where I have not sown and gather where I have not scattered seed? Well then, you should have put my money on deposit with the bankers, so that when I returned I would have received it back with interest. So take the bag of gold from him and give it to the one who has ten bags.' "For whoever has will be given more, and they will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what they have, will be taken from them. And throw that worthless servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." (Vs.19-30)

So we see the response of the master to these three servants. To the two faithful ones who used the master's resources for the master's purposes: *commendation* and *reward*; for the one servant who did not: *condemnation*. I think Jesus, in telling this parable, is presenting three lessons and these three lessons revolve around the main characters in the parable; this was common in parables. The main characters would often be what would teach the lessons. And from the master in this story we learn that God gives a portion of His resources to people, expecting that they would be good stewards of those resources. Now I want you to understand something. Although this parable uses money as an illustration, I don't think money is the main point—often times that can confuse people. They think Jesus is primarily teaching about money. No, this parable applies to our money, but I think this parable we could have used to talk about what we did last week—the resource of time. And obviously it can be used to talk about the resource we will discuss next week and that is money. But we could also talk about the resource God has given to us—namely talent—and these principles apply here. I think the money is just the illustration of a larger principle—that God has entrusted His followers with the resources to be used for the purposes that He designed—for kingdom purposes. So we learn that from the master.

From the two faithful servants we see that God will commend and reward those who are good stewards of the resources that God has entrusted to them. And notice by the identical commendation and reward of both of the two faithful servants, we see that their stewardship of these resources indicate that they are rightly related to the master. They are His. He commends them both, '**Well done, good and faithful servants.**' And the ultimate reward they get, '**Come and share your master's happiness.**' So being in the presence of the master and sharing all that is the master's, that's the reward. And their stewardship of the resources shows that they are rightly related to the master so that they could enjoy his presence and everything that is His.

But sadly we learn a third lesson in this parable associated with the unfaithful steward, unfaithful servant, and that is those who do not use their resources from God for the purposes that He intends, reveal that they don't really relate rightly to the master. They don't belong to the master and they will be punished by being removed from his presence and all that is his. They won't have access to all that is his; they won't be able to enjoy his presence. Their lack of stewardship of the resources the master has given shows that they are really not a true servant—they are not of the master.

What does this have to do then with our abilities and talents? God has entrusted to us a valuable resource of our talents, our abilities. Again they are His, not mine. And He's given them to us to do His work, His kingdom work, if we are followers of Jesus. And just as the resource of time, just

as the resource of money, whatever other resource we can think of, our abilities and talents, our resources are to be used for the Master's purpose. That's why He gave them to us. And our stewardship of our abilities and our talents—that valuable resource—really reveals how we relate to the Master, if we are really one of the Master's, if we have a right relationship with Him, if we are using those abilities for kingdom purposes.

What do we mean by using them for kingdom purposes? Using our abilities and talents to introduce people to the kingdom, and more importantly, to the King Himself, so they might have a relationship with Him. Using our talents and abilities to pursue justice, to meet the needs of individuals, to build up the body of Christ, to bring God glory—our talents and abilities can be used for all of those kingdom purposes. That's why God has given them to us. And our stewarding of that resource indicates what our relationship is to the Master. Our stewardship of these resources and, on the flip side - or a lack thereof - might reveal that no matter what I claim, no matter what prayers I may have prayed in the past, it might reveal maybe I don't have a genuine relationship with the Master. And if I might steal a little phrase and alter it a bit from Jesus' brother James, *What good is it then if you say that you have faith, but you never use your abilities, your talents, for God's purposes? Can that faith save you? Clearly the answer is, No.* And the idea here is that a person whose life has been changed by the grace of God and who is now a member of the kingdom will, in response, use those abilities, those talents, for kingdom purposes. That's a great indicator of whether you have a right relationship with God. Just like the use of your time, use of your talent will reveal whether you have a right relationship with the Creator. As we'll see, you know, when we think about next week, the use of your money, your resources, will indicate your relationship with the Master.

Well you might be saying, "Alright, but I'm not a talented person. I don't have any talents, so this really doesn't apply to me." Well, my response to you is, "Yes, you do." We all have abilities—things we are good at, we have a knack for. You are an image-bearer and, as an image-bearer, you do have abilities and capacities that you can use for God's glory and to work for His kingdom. Yes, maybe you don't have a talent that sometimes we think of as some showy talent that everybody sees and notices, but it's not the status we might say of the talent. Again I don't think one talent is inherently better than another. You all have abilities to be used for kingdom purposes. Maybe you need to do a little more discovering of what your abilities are and how you might put them to use. You know, talk to a friend; talk to a family member; do some thinking. You know, "What are some things I'm good at?" Maybe, what am I passionate for? What would I like to do and then start to develop your skills in that area? We all have abilities. We all have ways we can contribute, again to work for God's kingdom. So we all have abilities, even as image-bearers.

But you might say, "Yes, but you don't understand, my talent isn't very spiritual. You know, I don't have any talent that I can use, or abilities that I can use in weekend services, or the ministry of a church." Again, my response to you is, "Yes, you do." Do not buy into the lie from our society and that many Christians I think unknowingly perpetuate, that there is a sacred part of your life and a secular part. For the Christian it is all sacred; it is all sacred! There are no sacred abilities and then secular abilities. They are all sacred and you can use whatever abilities, whatever talents that God has entrusted to you, for His purposes. In his book *One Life*, Scot McKnight says something I think is spot on. He says that *ordinary work is where God is at work*—ordinary work is where God is at work! And if God has given you certain abilities, certain talents, your use and development of those is no less important than the abilities and talents that are used and developed by those in explicitly religious roles. The chef, the attorney, the accountant, the teacher, the farmer, if God has called you to those roles and given you gifts and abilities, those are no less important to God and no

less significant for kingdom work than any of the abilities and talents that are required to stand up here and do what I'm doing this morning or that of the musicians here in leading us in singing, or missionaries across seas and so forth. I hope you believe that what God entrusted you with—abilities and talents—are very significant. They matter to God when you are using those in service to Him and to others and God expects that of His followers. It's an ethical responsibility—again grounded in our image-bearing, and then heightened by the fact that those of us who are the followers of Jesus have kingdom responsibilities.

Well, what do we do with this? Let me suggest a couple of things for you to think about as you leave this morning that you can do. The first is this: again, maybe some of this is new to you; maybe you have never thought about your talent, your ability, as being something that God could actually use for kingdom purposes—maybe because you think it could only be in the setting of a weekend service. Or maybe God has laid upon your heart now to really be serious about the use and development of your talents. I'd suggest this: maybe go home today, over lunch, sometime today, hopefully in a group of people, discuss, now think hard about, "What is it? What talent or abilities do I have and how can I use those for kingdom purposes?" Again, whether your talent involves your occupation, whether it's something you do as a hobby on the side, whatever—"How can I use the talents, the abilities God has given me for kingdom purposes?" Come up with a plan. How am I going to do that? And again, you are all talented. You all have abilities God has given you as image-bearers. Let's seek to put those to work.

Just one quick example, seeing that it's the start of the school year and you know from grade school, up through the university, most people are back in school now or just getting ready to go back. Let me encourage you students: that in what can seem to be drudgery of the academic life, of the studies and homework and sitting in class all day—doesn't seem to be much of a point to it at times—let me suggest that you, as a follower of Jesus, take your studies very seriously and develop your intellectual abilities that God can use now and in the future for kingdom work. Take that very seriously because the thing that you are studying now, even in grade school, obviously in the university setting, you are preparing for a lifetime of ministry for the King. Work hard; dedicate yourself to that task; I think God requires that of us. So think about how you can take your specific abilities and use them for God's intended purposes.

Let me suggest the second thing that you can do. I mentioned Scot McKnight's book *One Life*. I recommend that you retain a copy and read McKnight's book. Scot McKnight argues that we have one life, just one life, and we should do something significant with that life and the most meaningful significant thing that we can do is follow Jesus fully with that life. He says a lot more in it than just referencing our abilities and talents and so forth, but there's a lot in here that applies to that. How can God use me—use you where you are at, your dreams and passions and aligning them with what God's purpose for the world is? I'd recommend that you get that. Now there are a very few copies out at the publication desk if you want to purchase them. They might not last long, so if you want a copy, there are a few available. If not, I would recommend that you order one on your own or, if you have a Nook, or a Kindle, you can download it on that. But I think this would benefit you and give you again some more ideas and some vision for how God might use you—Scot McKnight's book *One Life*.

A third thing that I would like for you to do is that, as you leave today, again you probably noticed coming in, there are a lot of booths out here—the Service Expo—a lot of opportunities for you to get involved in various things God is doing here in Lincoln Berean, doing in the community of Lincoln and, really, around the world. And I'd suggest that you go out and you at least walk by and look at

those booths, talk with people there, be thinking, "How can I take my abilities, my talents, and use them in some of these ways, in some of these ministries, again, in the church, through the community?" Maybe you don't see anything out there that just strikes you, or you are still not sure of what abilities that you have that might be used, then I recommend that you find the Church Unleashed booth—they are right out from the center here—and you talk with Barb Harms and her team and talk with them about ways that your abilities and talents intersect with what God is doing here at our church and in the community, around the world, and figure out how can you use this resource that God has given you for kingdom purposes? You know maybe you won't do that but, later in the week, maybe God again burdens your heart with this, give Barb Harms a call. She is more than happy to sit down with you and talk with you again about how your abilities and your talents, your gifts, can be used in service for the kingdom.

So, yes, we do have an ethical responsibility to use and develop our talents and our abilities. And it's the desire of the faithful steward that they do hear those words, "Well done, good and faithful servant." And may that be true of us, with the stewardship of this precious resource God has given us—our abilities and our talents.

Dear Lord, thank You for creating us as Your image that You've given us these wonderful abilities and talents to be Your representatives here on earth, to represent You before the world. Thank You for redeeming us, bringing us into Your kingdom of light, and again making us to be part of Your work. With that, Lord, comes great responsibility that we use all of the resources You've entrusted to us for Your purposes; that includes our talents and our abilities. Lord, may we use those. May we dedicate our lives to using those resources for Your work. They are not our abilities; they are Yours. You've entrusted them to us. May we be found good stewards. So it's to that end we dedicate ourselves to this very task. Amen.

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