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Redeeming Talent

Time, Talent, Treasure Series

Daniel 1:1-21

Pastor Mark Kremer

It's very exciting to see (on the video clip) things like this: Adventure Seekers! That has been a vision and an initiative that was simply taken by people from this congregation, completely on their own, to start that program—to fund it, to develop the volunteers who would go down and do it week in and week out. I just find that absolutely amazing and exciting to see what God stirs up among us—and that vision that gets to be lived out. If you don't have a place where you're actively engaged and giving your life away to others, we encourage you after the service to stop and see the opportunities. This weekend are opportunities that are out in our community—outside the walls of the church—where you can get involved and give your time and use your talents for God's glory, and this is just another great example.

Now we've talked so far this fall about both *treasure* and our *time* as resources that God has given to us to be used for His glory, and this morning we're going to talk about the last "T" which is *talent*. Now talent is a little different than both time and treasure. Time and treasure are sort of external resources. But when we talk about talent, we are talking about something that is very closely connected to our own identity—who we are. This comes down to understanding how I'm really wired and what is unique about me. And I believe that next to understanding and believing the Gospel itself, a right understanding of what it means to redeem your talents, what it means to be a person with talent, is one of the most important life-changing things you can get a hold of. It absolutely makes the difference between having a life that is lived well—that's full of purpose and that will change the trajectory of your life—and it absolutely will determine the legacy that you leave behind when you're gone.

So we want to talk about this morning: what does it mean to redeem the talents that we have? In order to do that we're going to put before us a story from the Old Testament as exhibit "A" of what it looks like to redeem talent. So, turn in your Bibles to the book of Daniel—the prophet Daniel in the Old Testament. If you have a hard time finding it, just find Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and then Daniel. This is one of those great stories that really helps us understand what talent is and how it can be rightly used in life. Daniel, chapter 1, beginning in verse 1:

> **In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it. The Lord gave Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand, along with some of the vessels of the house of God; and he brought them to the land of Shinar, to the house of his god, and he brought the vessels into the treasury of his god.**
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> **Then the king ordered Ashpenaz, the chief of his officials, to bring in some of the sons of Israel, including some of the royal family and of the nobles, youths in whom was no defect, who were good-looking, showing intelligence in every *branch of* wisdom, endowed with understanding and discerning knowledge, and who had ability for serving in the king's court; and *he ordered him* to teach them the literature and language of the Chaldeans. The king appointed for them a daily ration from the king's choice food and from the wine which he drank, and *appointed* that they should be educated three years, at the end of which they were to enter the king's personal**

service. Now among them from the sons of Judah were Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. (*NASB, Daniel 1:1-6)

Now this is a unique situation. Because of the idolatry and the sinfulness of the Hebrew people, God allowed this great empire and this great King Nebuchadnezzar to come and conquer the nation of Judah and carry the people of Judah back into captivity, many of them. And among them were some of the royal family and the nobles from the land of Judah. And here we see that the leadership of Babylon selected from among the sons of Judah those who seemed to have talent for leadership— unique talents. Among them were these four young men, probably in their teens or early twenties. They were called **youths** and they were endowed with talents. They had abilities, abilities that were suited to leadership in this kingdom and, when we read the story and you read verse 4, it outlines these talents. In the world's eyes we would call these *"very talented young men"* because the world sort of sees talent as either, "You have it or you don't have it."

So the question, as you read these first few verses of this story, the question that I would ask you is, "Do you see yourself in this story? Do you identify with these four young men? Can you say in your own spirit, 'You know, I have talent; I have ability; I've been given some significant talents and abilities by God'?" Or, do you find yourself this morning sort of inside, maybe not outside, shaking your head and saying, "I don't identify at all. I am not talented; I've really got….nothing." Now I'm just guessing that many of us in this room this morning would have a hard time identifying ourselves as talented people along the lines of these talents—yeah, maybe not the same talents, but talented none the less. We sometimes have a hard time just seeing ourselves as people with talent and ability. Why do you suppose that is? Perhaps in your formative years there were people in your life who told you, you wouldn't really amount to much of anything, that you really didn't have much talent or ability. And because of where you were at in life, you began to believe what they said. Perhaps some of us don't really see ourselves in this story because during our formal schooling we didn't do very well at school. We may have been, you know, at the lower end of the grading scale and, over the years—by the way if that's you, some of the most brilliant inventors and leaders of the world have been people who failed at formal schooling. Thomas Edison for instance, with one thousand, ninety-three invention patents, failed out of school. Perhaps you don't see yourself as a person of talent because you have tried some things in life; you tried starting a business; you tried singing; you tried whatever it is; you tried art and you didn't do very well at it. And so you concluded, "You know, I just am not a person of talent. My mother always thought that I was a singer and in our little church she wanted me to sing and it wasn't until my wife and I were married and Donna got a hold of my mom and said, "You know, Mom, he really can't sing. *(laughter)* Okay? Drop it!" It was very, very helpful to be free from that false talent.

Perhaps you don't see yourself as a person of talent because in the religious environment you grew up in, to think that you were talented was thought to be prideful. If you do not this morning see yourself as a talented—a very talented individual—then I am telling you, you've believed a lie. You have been given significant talent and ability. To know that for certain, we need to go no further than back to Genesis, chapters 1 and 2, to understand who we are. You see for the first five days of creation God said, "Let there be..." and all sorts of different aspects of creation were formed. But on the sixth day Father, Son and Spirit had a conversation and they said to one another, "*Let us make man in our image, after our likeness." And so God created man in His own image, in the image of God created him; He created him male and female; He created them.*

Chapter 2 goes on to give us that zoom lens into that moment of creation and it says that God didn't just stand back and speak but God took the dirt of the ground and formed and fashioned it into a human being and then breathed the very life of God into the nostrils and man became a living being.

Now there are many different things that are a part of being an image-bearer but that is what you and I are. We are made in the image of God; therefore we bear His image in the world. That is who you are and that means that you have been given talents and abilities because God has vast talent and ability. We are not God but we are a reflection of who God is, including talents and abilities and the ability to take those talents and make something out of them in the world. We know that God believes that Himself from that story because it says that God said after God had made man, "Go out and be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and rule over it." God gave man the responsibility, based on the talent and ability that He'd given him, to make something out of this world. What God started in a garden, God gave to man and said, "Now you take it from the garden and fill the whole earth with what I've started." He said, "I want you to flourish; you have the ability to flourish. You have the ability to multiply, to grow and to develop this earth. You have the ability to fill it, which means to make it teem with life."

When we think of teeming, we think of schools of fish, you know, where there's just thousands of fish swimming in a school and it's just teeming with life! God gave us the ability to make teeming a part of life here on earth. And that word *subdue* means to harness, harness the energy of what God has made and to make something out of it, which is really the meaning of *to rule*. To rule is: make something out of this world—make things, make cities, make cultures, make goods, make art, make music and make meaning out of it all. So much did God believe in this image-bearer that He had created, that He actually said that the garden itself was not even all it could be, because there was no one there yet to tend and cultivate it. You see, this is a partnership between God and man—our talents and abilities in His hands, given to us as a gift, is what makes the world the fantastic place that it is. You are an image-bearer; you have been given talent and ability to make something out of this world to cause it to flourish.

You say, "Well, what about sin? Didn't sin mar the image? Absolutely, sin marred the image! And rather than man simply going out to cause the world to flourish and to make something good out of it, man now took his talents and abilities to create other gods—false gods—and to play god, to seek to be god, and to play god in other people's lives. And that brings about injustice.

But the story doesn't end there because, as we've celebrated this morning in communion, Jesus, God Himself, came in the flesh to overcome that sin, to take the penalty for us and free us from sin—both its penalty and its power—so that we are now, in Christ, restored image-bearers, actually better than the original in the sense that we are now infused with the very power, resurrection power of Jesus. You not only are a talented individual but if you are in Christ this morning, you are infused with the very Spirit life of God, the very resurrection power of God that allows you to go out and make something of the world and the opportunities you have. That is who you are and my prayer is that you would see yourself in this story! Yeah, maybe very different talents—perhaps your talents aren't suited at all to the kind of leadership that these four young men had the talent for—but you have talents nonetheless. And not only did God give these four young men talent but He gave them opportunity suited to those talents. And so God gave them opportunity, as God will give you and me opportunity to use the talents and abilities that He's given to us. Now, with every opportunity to use our talent there comes a challenge. There are some potential pitfalls along the way. Verse 7:

Then the commander of the officials assigned *new* names to them; and to Daniel he assigned *the name* Belteshazzar, to Hananiah Shadrach, to Mishael Meshach and to Azariah Abed-nego.

We get a little foretaste of what we're just about to read and that is they were taking their talents and abilities into a hostile environment. You see, for the Hebrew people, their name was rich in spiritual meaning and significance. These young men's names, no doubt, had really significant meaning to them, related to who they were as the people of God and to their families. But now they're in Babylon and the Babylonian officials were basically saying, "I want you to forget who you were and we're going to give you a new identity." This becomes a challenge because talents lead us into opportunities and those opportunities present us with hard choices to make. What do I do...because I know who I am...but now someone is asking me to be something else? Verse 8**...but Daniel...**wasn't going to buy his new name; Daniel used his own name:

But Daniel made up his mind that he would not defile himself with the king's choice food or with the wine which he drank; so he sought *permission* from the commander of the officials that he might not defile himself. Now God granted Daniel favor and compassion in the sight of the commander of the officials, and the commander of the officials said to Daniel, "I am afraid of my lord the king, who has appointed your food and your drink; for why should he see your faces looking more haggard than the youths who are your own age? Then you would make me forfeit my head to the king." But Daniel said to the overseer whom the commander of the officials had appointed over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah, Please test your servants for ten days, and let us be given some vegetables to eat and water to drink. Then let our appearance be observed in your presence, and the appearance of the youths who are eating the king's choice food; and deal with your servants according to what you see." So he listened to them in this matter and tested them for ten days. At the end of ten days their appearance seemed better and they were fatter than all the youths who had been eating the king's choice food. So the overseer continued to withhold their choice food and the wine they were to drink, and kept giving them vegetables. (Vs. 8-16)

What is revealed in these verses is that Daniel is not just a person of talent but he was a person of deep faith. Daniel's heart for God directed how he would engage his talents. His commitment to his God was first and foremost, and Daniel determined two things. First he determined that he would obey God, regardless of what the cost would be. He would not defile himself and here the issue was not so much the food itself and the drink itself—meat and wine—but it was, the commentators agree, the fact that this meat and wine had been offered to the idols of Babylon first, and then it was consumed. And so it was food that was a part of idolatry, of false worship of false gods. And that makes sense that that's what the Babylonians would do because, if the nobility and rulers wanted more power and wanted the favor of the gods, they would offer their food to the gods and then consume it, thinking that after it had been given to the gods, they would get more strength and wisdom and power out of that food. And Daniel saw it as idolatry; he saw it as denying his God. And Daniel determined that he would not do that; he would stay true to the living God.

But a part of that staying true to the living God was not just *not* participating in that idolatry but it was also treating with respect and honor the authority that was over him. You notice that Daniel was very respectful and honoring to the commander and the commander was afraid when Daniel refused, afraid that it was going to cost him his own head and Daniel very wisely, very graciously, very sincerely treated him with honor and respect. You see, I think Daniel understood the two great

commandments: *Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength.* Yes, he would obey and follow the living God. But, *love your neighbor as yourself* is also a part of obeying God and, in this case, his neighbor was his commander. And what did that commander deserve out of obedience to God? He deserved to be treated with respect and honor. Those two go hand in hand. That is what it means to obey God. It is to treat people right *horizontally*, as well as stay in right relationship with God *vertically*. And Daniel was determined to do that, to follow God. His heart determined what would happen with those talents and abilities. That was first, and the talents would follow.

Now here are a couple of lies that we tend to believe around this point ourselves because our talents often put us in arenas and environments where we are asked to compromise our faith, perhaps to deny even Jesus in those environments, and we struggle with that. And there is one of the lies we tend to believe—that if I'm going to have a real position of influence, I have to compromise my faith. And that is a lie because, if you compromise your faith on the way to a place of influence, if and when you ever get there, you will not have any influence.

And the second lie that we tend to believe is: if I obey God, my opportunities will be diminished; God won't be able to use me. I have to compromise because if I really obey God, then I won't be able to fully use my talents and abilities. And this story flies right in the face of that because, at the end of this ten day test, they were not *less* for having obeyed God; they were *better*. You and I are always better; our talents always shine through brighter when our first priority is from the heart to obey God and to be rightly related to Him. We will always be more, never less. Daniel understood that, and it played out exactly that way in this story—that it was quite evident that they were better and more because they served the true, living God. And because of that, they had even more influence.

So, we have talents and abilities given to us by God as image-bearers. God positions us and gives us opportunity to use those challenges but those opportunities must not be opportunities for compromising our relationship with God. We must keep our heart centered on Him, obeying Him and following Him. That's our first priority. But we also, then, have a responsibility to go one step further. Verse 17:

> **As for these four youths, God gave them knowledge and intelligence in every *branch of* literature and wisdom; Daniel even understood all *kinds of* visions and dreams. Then at the end of the days which the king had specified for presenting them, the commander of the officials presented them before Nebuchadnezzar. The king talked with them, and out of them all not one was found like Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah; so they entered the king's personal service. As for every matter of wisdom and understanding about which the king consulted them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians *and* conjurers who *were* in all his realm.** (Vs. 17-20)

We see not only did God give these young men these talents and abilities but they developed those talents and abilities to their fullest. For three years they were in this elite leadership PhD program in the kingdom of Babylon, and they did not squander those three years. They gave themselves wholeheartedly to learning everything they could possibly learn. They took the raw talent and ability that God gave them and they applied diligence to see that those talents and abilities would be fully realized and maximized in life. And so at the end of those three years, when it came time for the oral exams, the king of the most powerful nation realm on earth gave the oral exams himself and as he questioned all of these young people who had been a part of this leadership program, he says

he found none as good as Hananiah, Mishael, Azariah and Daniel. In fact, they weren't just a little better; they were ten times better than everybody else!

For some reason we have this sense that perhaps we really shouldn't try to be the best at what we have been given. Again, there's this sort of false humility that thinks, "Ah shucks, I probably shouldn't really stand out that much." But I believe that God, the One who made you in His own image, is most delighted when you, as fully as you possibly can, reflect His glory by developing your talents to their absolute fullest. That is a part of your worship of the living God—to apply yourself to become all that you can be, to take whatever talents and abilities you have and to seek to develop and grow them, to be the best you possibly can be at those things. And God is delighted in that! That's what He created you to do and to be! And God is diminished and grieved when we sit on our talents and abilities, when we don't develop them. When He gave them to us, not only as a gift to us to help bring glory to Him but to bring the flourishing to the world, that is, it's redemption and restoration. God gave you those talents in order that you would develop and grow them just like in Genesis. "Take what I have given you now, and multiply; be fruitful. Take it all the way as far as you can, that talent and ability. Apply yourself to it."

Isn't that exactly what Jesus was talking about in the *Parable of the Talents* in the New Testament? When he gave talents to different ones, one person just sat on it and didn't do anything with it. The others developed their talents and when the master came back he praised the ones who developed their talents, who took it and did whatever they could do with that talent. But to the one who just simply sat on it—hid it—he cursed him. You see, God has given you something, some unique abilities, and he wants you and me to take those things and for His glory and for the flourishing of the world—that is it's redemption and restoration—maximize and use those talents to their fullest.

This chapter ends with a simple little verse, verse 21, that doesn't really appear to say a whole lot but it's loaded with something important for us to understand.

And Daniel continued until the first year of Cyrus the king. (Vs. 21)

And you say, "So what?" What that verse tells us is that Daniel served as a key leader in the most powerful nation in the world for sixty-five years, over four different kings—almost unheard of because, usually, each new king would remove the people from the previous king out of fear that they would have something up their sleeve. But Daniel's integrity and his wisdom and his talent and ability and his heart allowed him to have a sixty-five year career as a powerful, influential person in this kingdom. In fact, Daniel's influence was so great, as you read through chapters two through six, you will see story after story about how Daniel brought influence through his talents into the world to the point that this same pagan king actually came to a place of falling on his knees and acknowledging the living and true God. Daniel wasn't a pastor or missionary. He was a man with talent suited to the opportunity, with a heart to serve God in that place and to develop and maximize those talents and abilities that God gave him. And God gave him influence for sixty-five years—no take that back. God has given him influence for twenty-six hundred years! He's still influencing us today.

So what do we want to take away from this story this morning? The first thing I want you to take away is that God has given you talents and abilities. You need to understand and see that. You are an image-bearer. It is an insult to God to tell Him, "I have nothing," because you have been made an image-bearer. Do not diminish or dismiss the talents that you have.

The second thing that I would want you to walk away with this morning is that using your talents and abilities, in whatever spheres where those particular talents and abilities are well-suited, is one of your primary ways of worshipping God! Worship is not just happening here on Saturday night and Sunday morning. Worship is what you do with the image-bearing capacity God has given you and how you live that out in whatever environments God calls you to live it in. It may be in your work and how you use your talents there; it may be using those talents in some hobby, some other thing; it may be in volunteering somewhere; it may be developing those talents and abilities in your family or wherever that is. But God has given you something significant and He wants you to use those abilities for His glory and the flourishing of the world—that is to work for its redemption and restoration. That is what God has called you to, and that means every single day of your life is a day full of meaning and significance and importance.

And thirdly, I would challenge us this morning to develop those talents and abilities and perhaps even explore talents and abilities that we may think we might have but we've never even really opened the box to see what's in there. I want to particularly challenge those of us in the audience this morning who are fifty years old and older, because it's very easy when you get to that middle age to sort of go, "You know what, I'm kind of tired and I've worked hard and I'm just going to kind of sit back and just kind of let life happen," and we get kind of sedentary and I'm just telling you, by God's grace we ought to be engaged in learning new things and developing new talents and abilities. There may be things that have laid latent inside of you and all the business of family and career and those things, you've never had the chance to fully develop. I'm always impressed when I meet people who are older in life, in their 80's and 90's, who are still growing, still learning, still developing talents. Peter Drucker is one who comes to mind—lived to 95 years old—a prolific writer of business management, kind of the guru of business management in the United States and actually around the world for a long, long time. He died at age 95, just a few years ago. At age 58, Peter Drucker said this, "I really don't know what I want to do when I grow up," and he said that to his kids and his kids would say, "Dad, come on, you're grown up; you're over the hill!" He said, "No, I mean it, I have things I want to do." And every three years Peter Drucker would determine to learn something new, develop some new talent in his life, and he'd give three years to try to develop that talent. And I would just challenge us this morning: what is latent in you that God has put there that is yet undeveloped, that could be used for His glory?

And my last comment this morning I want to address particularly to those who are young students, high school, college age. First of all I want to say to you and to your parents, grandparents, teachers, mentors, coaches—everybody that has influence on you—have a heart for God. Follow God with a whole heart but also understand you have been given talent and ability that God wants to unleash for the flourishing of the world. Does it not make sense that there would be Christians that would be the best in all kinds of fields of endeavor—the best journalists, the best artists, the best educators, the best physicians, the best business people, the best movie makers, the best writers? Does it not make sense that God would call His people to places of real significance and influence in a culture that desperately needs transformation? But we have to have a vision to believe that I have something significant from God to contribute to the world, and I would take that talent and ability, along with my heart to follow Christ, and use that and develop it to its absolute fullest to see where God might allow me to have opportunity to make a real impact in society over the long term. That's a vision that I hope, as a young person, you would get excited about and own and begin to pursue. And for those of us that surround young people that we would help them identify and believe that

they have something significant from God to contribute to the world. May God help us not to diminish what He's given us but to grow it and develop it and use it to the fullest for the glory of God and the flourishing of the world—that is to seek its redemption and restoration.

Our Father, I pray that we would see ourselves as no different from these young men—perhaps different talents and abilities, but no less talented. May we follow their path with a heart to love You and serve You and worship You but also a desire to use everything we've been given to its fullest for Your glory and to make a real lasting difference in this world. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

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