



HG12: Commitment Sunday 'The Parable Of The Talents'

Matthew 25:14-30

Home Group Sermon Notes

15th March 2009 - Robin Stevens

Introduction: Why should we give away that which appears to be ours – whether it's our money or our time or the use of the skills and abilities that we have? Because we believe that:

God owns all that we have [*Kind David's affirmation in 1 Chronicles 29:14 that "All things come from you, and of your own have we given you."*]

God has given us everything we have [*Psalm 24:12 The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it*]

God's is a giver and his greatest gift is Jesus Christ [*John 3:16 God so loved the world that he gave his only Son*]

We are responsible to God for what we do with that which he has entrusted to us [*Romans 14:12 So then each of us will be accountable to God*]

The relationship that we have with God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit defines how we should live our lives according to the values of God's kingdom. We know that we've been entrusted with many gifts by God and we are stewards of all that God has given us. So stewardship has to be a way of life.

Parable of the Talents: This parable that Jesus told helps us to understand how we should treat all the things that God has entrusted to us as his disciples. It's probably the scariest parable in the whole of the New Testament! An owner has slaves (not servants) and they owe everything to the owner because it all belongs to him. There are no personal possessions – the very life of that slave belongs to the master. He has the power of life and death over them and everything they do – everything they have – they owe to the generosity of the owner. The owner hands over his wealth – he doesn't hand over ownership. He entrusts his possessions to these slaves according to their abilities and according to his personal choice and decision. They don't bargain with him over how much they want or how much they are to get. It's not negotiable. And the master says, it's in your hands – but it's still mine. After a time the master comes back and asks what's been going on. One says he worked with what was entrusted to him and he doubled it. The master says well done, you did what I expected you to do. Share my delight! The five talents became ten – the two talents became four. The master celebrates the benefit that he's received from what was entrusted to these slaves. Along comes the third slave who says he's not done so badly because he's not lost anything. It's nerve racking to be entrusted with something and you break it or lose it. "I haven't done any of those things," he says, "the talent's the same as when it was given to me." The master hasn't lost anything. "Here it is. You gave it to me and I protected it – buried it, in fact, so nobody could get at it."

"You miserable useless slave – you've done nothing!"

"But I was scared I might lose it."

"But you did nothing."

"I was afraid you might be angry with me."

"I am! You did nothing. There's no place for you in my household."

So what's this parable saying to us? Everything we have, everything we are already belongs to God. This is the same story as the story of creation in Genesis. God doesn't hand the world over to Adam and Eve and say "the best of luck" – God says it's still mine and I'm giving you responsibility. I'm entrusting you with the entire world. And when they blew it – God didn't say he was taking it back. He says, "It's going to be a lot harder but I'm still entrusting it to you. Now off you go. It's going to be tough but it's still my world and it's still in your hands." We're accountable for what's been entrusted to us. As we journey through life God says to us, "what are you doing with what I've put into your hands?" The question won't be how much did you gain but what did you do with what I entrusted to you. The life of the steward involves risk taking. And if we take this parable seriously we have to recognise that the whole of life belongs to God. It's 100% – it all belongs to God and there's nothing left over.

⇒ I can't set a limit on what I give to God by what I put in the collection on a Sunday morning;

⇒ I can't limit the time I spend for God's work to what I do to support Church activities;

⇒ I can't set a limit to the energies and skills that I offer to God by what I use when it's convenient.

This parable challenges all of our spending, all of our time and all of our energies and skills. And it confronts us with our whole attitude to the world in which we live because God's entrusted it to us. God has been incredibly generous in giving us all kind of freedoms: the way our time is spent; the way our money's spent; the way our energies and talents and skills are used; but there's one proviso. God says "I expect to find some benefit for myself in what I've entrusted to you. What's in it for me? I expect a return on my investment."

Tithe: One of the things that God has entrusted to us is our money. Some have more than others – some have less than others. In Old Testament times, God gave his people the gift of the Law. In Leviticus 27 he commanded them to give a tithe, 10% of their crops and herds back to him, largely to support the Levites – the priests. The tithe was a holy reminder that whether they were rich or poor, everything the people had belonged to him. The prophet Malachi said to do less than to tithe is to rob God (Malachi 3:8). On top of that tithe, the Israelites were to give special offerings on specific occasions. In addition to that, they also gave alms to the poor as needed. That was the *minimum*, commanded in Scripture. Jesus criticized Pharisees who were tithing spices while neglecting more important things, but he didn't dismiss tithing altogether (Matthew 23:23). In the Sermon on the Mount (the sermon on the amount?!) he expected the continuation of offerings when he spoke about the importance of reconciliation with a brother or sister 'when you are offering your gift at the altar' (Matthew 5:23f). There is no evidence that the very first Christians stopped tithing, providing offerings, and giving alms. In the new covenant in which we have been given the gift of the Spirit and every spiritual blessing, God says, 'Give as you have been prospered'.

So the question that is often asked is how these biblical principles of giving apply today. This is sometimes related to the particular issue of the place of the tithe in modern society. What is clear from the biblical material is that whatever attitude is taken towards the idea of the tithe, the underlying principles are that giving must be from the heart and sacrificial and proportionate. That is more important and basic than any discussion of a particular percentage. But many find the benchmark of 10% a useful guideline.

Discipleship: I've tried to show the importance of our giving to God's mission through the Church as being a token of our total responsibility to the things of God. I want now to look at how this attitude might develop as we move along our journey of discipleship – from where we are to where God's calling us to be. We're all at different points on that journey and none of us has yet got to where God wants us to be. But it's vital for us to be on that journey. Having a relationship with God in faith requires us to look at how we live our lives in the light of that relationship so that we connect with the values of God's kingdom. So there is a connection between where we are on our journey of discipleship (the movement from where we are to where God is calling us to be) and how we view and respond to the call on us to resource God's mission through the Church – with our money as well as with all that we have and are. The parable of the talents tells us that we're called to use the gifts that God's given us for his benefit. If we just bury them and do nothing with them, God is angry with us.

So I want to share with you what I have called six steps of discipleship. They are six steps on our journey of discipleship and I think that where we are on that journey dictates the way we address our giving.

SURVIVAL: I start with people who aren't a part of the Church community. They live in the world out there and their need is survival – and there's a chance that the church might help. So they might give a bit when they're asked in the same way that they pay an insurance premium – because the church ought to be there in case it's needed.

SUPERMARKET: Then people start coming to church from time to time but very much on their terms. Their need is safety and by treating the church on their terms they feel safe and unchallenged. Basically they're customers who buy into what they want – Christmas carols, Mothering Sunday, and so on. They're happy to pay towards the cost of the bits of the church that they want and enjoy – rather like their payments for a trolley of goods at a supermarket.

SUPPORT: The next step is taken when people develop an element of commitment to the Church – or even to God. Church attendance is becoming regular – if only once a month. The work of the Church is becoming important to them and so they'll support it. They see themselves as a 'supporter' and they start to talk about 'their church'.

SUBSCRIPTION: Then people start to see that it's their duty and their joy to be involved in worship and other activities and they'll want to move to full 'membership'. They get involved with the Church's life. They see themselves as a 'church member' and wish to contribute their fair share of the resources it needs – so they give regularly and tax-efficiently.

But this is only step four of my six steps. How can we take this forward? At this point on the journey, faith is taking over and you're starting to trust in God – be careful as anything could happen! This may be described as the point of conversion but it may be frightening to say so!

SUBMISSION: I call the next step 'submission' because your understanding of being a disciple is that you should put God first in your life and do what he's calling you to be and to do – even with your money. Giving starts to be at a level that others might consider to be generous. When you take this step you see a deeper meaning in life and your giving responds to God and not just to the needs of the church. You see yourself as a child of God and you're putting him first in your life.

SACRIFICE: I've called the final step 'sacrifice' because our Christian calling is to be Christ-like and so naturally we respond joyfully and sacrificially in faith. This is the point at which we know that we are giving our money and ourselves in God's service because we can feel it. We see a purpose in life and going out of church is as important as coming in. Looking at our giving of money, we discover that we can respond to the tithe – giving a tenth. We've known about it all along on our journey of discipleship but we now discover that, under God, it's possible!

Emmanuel Billericay: So against that background I want to say some practical things about the funding of God's mission here and the way that we might address our own giving. The budget for 2009 here shows that £2,259 is needed each week. It's made up as follows:

£2,259 is needed each week. It's made up as follows:		Based on the experience of last year (2008) the income is likely to be:	
⇒	Clergy expenses and office £62	⇒	Giving (planned & collections) £1,379
⇒	Church and Services £447	⇒	Tax recovered through Gift Aid £345
⇒	Parish Share £1,481	⇒	Other income £312
⇒	Mission £77	⇒	Fees & donations for church use £54
⇒	Outside payments £192		Total £2,090
	Total £2,259		

The income needs to increase by about £170 a week. This isn't a huge sum if shared out between those who are part of the Christian community here. But the message I have been trying to share is that we give in proportion to our financial resources and so some will be challenged to increase their giving by more than others.

The weekly patterns of giving among the 109 givers are as follows:			And so the practical challenge to us is to review where we are and to see if we can move forward. There are three steps:
<i>No.</i>	<i>Amount</i>	<i>Total</i>	<p>1) <i>Review our giving:</i> see what we give now, work it out as a percentage of our income and see if we can increase that percentage. For example someone whose income is £1,200 a month and who is giving £6 a week is giving 2%. If they could increase to 5%, they would give another £9 a week, making £15 a week in total.</p> <p>2) <i>Give regularly:</i> it's good to note that many people do give on a regular basis but there may be some for whom this is a step that they haven't been able to take yet.</p> <p>3) <i>Give by Gift Aid:</i> if you are a taxpayer. Again many people use Gift Aid but there may be some who have not yet completed a declaration.</p>
	<i>per week</i>	<i>per week</i>	
12	up to £1	£8	
17	£1 to £4	£13	
37	£4 to £10	£250	
26	£10 to £20	£376	
12	£20 to £40	£326	
5	over £40	£336	

As you think these things through, I pray that you will allow yourself to plan your giving to God and his church first;

1. Before you pay other bills give in proportion to your income;
2. Trust in God that you can give regularly and sacrificially;
3. Believe that it's not the end of the world if the Emmanuel receives more than it needs – that's in fact the beginning of the growth of the Kingdom.



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COMPLETE AS MUCH AS YOU CAN ON THIS WORKSHEET IN PREPARATION **BEFORE** THE MEETING!

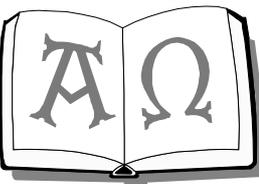
Don't forget to take your Bible to House Group along with any previous/other notes that might be helpful.

Welcome/Icebreaker (10 mins)



Looking Upwards - *Worship* (10 mins)

Songs of Worship; Prayers; Bible Readings; Meditations etc.



Looking Upwards - *Bible Study* (40 mins)

Read through the above Bible reading (and any readings below and the references in the sermon notes) and answer the following questions. You may find it helpful to read through the sermon notes as you do so. Discuss your answers in your Home Group.

- 1) A person is sometimes described as a "self-made man". How is that possible if what we believe about God's gifts is true?
- 2) Arising from the Parable of the Talents, in your parish of the Emmanuel, what has God entrusted to it? What is your faith community doing with it? What does God benefit from what's going on in your faith community – what does God get out of it?
- 3) When it comes to the giving of money, do you find the tithe a helpful benchmark? If not, why not? If not, how do you justify your opinion biblically?
- 4) Do you think that the six steps of giving ring true? Where do you think the congregation is generally along those steps? What specifically can you do to keep moving on your journey of discipleship?
- 5) How, if at all, should the current financial upheaval in the world affect our giving?

6) Should our giving be in response to the love of God or the demands of the parish budget? Which is most likely to help us with sacrificial giving?

7) "Double your level of giving and, if you don't notice any effect on your life-style, leave it there." Is this a helpful way to identify what our level of giving ought to be?

8) Which bible verse or passage or story speaks to you most helpfully about the giving of money to God's mission?



Is there anything you most want to put into practice as a result of this study?



Looking Inwards - *Caring for each other* (15 mins)

Is there anything you would like to share with the group:

For Thanksgiving?

For Prayer?

Or for help from the group?

*(Reflect with the Lord on your life at the moment and think if there is anything you would like to share and which you feel is appropriate. This is an **opportunity to share**, not something you have to do, however - 'it's the sharing that enables the caring!')*



Looking Outwards - *Concern for others* (15 mins)

Is there anything concerning someone in: church; family; friends; or neighbours which you would like to share:

For Thanksgiving?

For Prayer?

Or for possible action by the group?

(Please be careful not to pass on anything that is confidential or which you think the person concerned would not wish to be shared).

