

# Meeting With Christ

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Practical and Exegetical Studies on the Words of Jesus Christ

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Based on sermons of Pastor Eric Chang

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## THE PARABLE OF THE TALENTS

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### Matthew 25:14-30

The topics of judgment, reward and punishment are rather unpopular in Christian circles, and not often preached from the pulpit. But they are important in Jesus' teaching. In the Parable of the Talents, Jesus taught that while He is away, the believer must do the work of the kingdom faithfully and diligently, knowing that at the return of his Lord, his work will be greatly rewarded or severely judged. Let us read this parable, the Parable of the Talents, in Matthew 25:14-30.

*Matthew 25:14. "For the kingdom of heaven is like a man traveling to a far country, who called his own servants and delivered his goods to them.*

*15 "And to one he gave five talents, to another two, and to another one, to each according to his own ability; and immediately he went on a journey.*

*16 "Then he who had received the five talents went and traded with them, and made another five talents.*

*17 "And likewise he who had received two gained two more also.*

*18 "But he who had received one went and dug in the ground, and hid his lord's money.*

*19 "After a long time the lord of those servants came and settled accounts with them.*

*20 "So he who had received five talents came and brought five other talents, saying, 'Lord, you delivered to me five talents; look, I have gained five more talents besides them.'*

*21 "His lord said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful servant; you were faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord.'*

*22 "He also who had received two talents came and said, 'Lord, you delivered to me two talents; look, I have gained two more talents besides them.'*

*23 "His lord said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord.'*

*24 "Then he who had received the one talent came and said, 'Lord, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you have not sown, and gathering where you have not scattered seed.*

*25 'And I was afraid, and went and hid your talent in the ground. Look, there you have what is yours.'*

*26 "But his lord answered and said to him, 'You wicked and lazy servant, you knew that I reap where I have not sown, and gather where I have not scattered seed.*

*27 'So you ought to have deposited my money with the bankers, and at my coming I would have received back my own with interest.*

*28 'Therefore take the talent from him, and give it to him who has ten talents.*

*29 'For to everyone who has, more will be given, and he will have abundance; but from him who does not have, even what he has will be taken away.*

*30 'And cast the unprofitable servant into the outer darkness. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'*

## The household of God

We have in this parable the picture of a household, the household of a master and his servants. The picture of a household is often applied to the church in the NT. For example, Paul speaks about the 'household of faith' in Galatians 6:10. *So then, while we have opportunity, let us do good to all men, and especially to those who are of the **household of the faith**.* He speaks of the 'household of God' in Ephesians 2:19. *So then you are no longer strangers and sojourners, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the **household of God**.*

In our parable, the Lord Jesus is represented by the master, who is going away and will come back. Jesus has gone to be at the right hand of His Father, and He is going to come back again.

The servants of the household represent the believers. We are the servants of God. Indeed, we are His sons. But we are also his servants. Too often, we emphasize our sonship much to the neglect of our responsibility as expressed in this idea of servanthood. Paul delighted to talk about one title, the title of being a slave of Jesus Christ. He often begins his letters with the statement, 'Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus.' He could have chosen to write, 'Paul, a son of God,' but he does not do that. It seems that the notion of servanthood was more precious for him than his adoption as son. He sees himself and every believer as a servant of God, living totally for God as indeed every slave was totally the possession of his master.

The parable is about a rich master who called his servants to tell them that he will be out of the country for an extended period of time. He knew them well and was confident that they could be trusted with his wealth. He gave them a total of eight talents, expecting them to put this money to work. The word 'talent' here, of course, does not mean natural ability. It refers to a sum of money. In fact, the word 'talent' began as a unit of weight, a weight of gold for example. In the OT, we can read about 'talents of gold,' 'talents of silver,' 'talents of brass,' or 'talents of iron' (1Chronicles 29:7). How much was one talent? It is difficult to give an accurate modern equivalent, but we know that it was a very large amount of money, something equivalent to the wages of a working man for 10-15 years.

### According to one's ability

Notice that the servants did not receive the same amount of money. Five talents were given to one, two to another, and one to the third servant. What was the deciding factor? The parable tells us that it was decided on the basis of the ability of each servant. V. 15: *And to one he gave five talents, to another, two, and to another, one, each **according to his own ability**.* It is important to say that 'ability' here should not be understood in terms of natural ability. God does not entrust one with more simply because a person is naturally more able. Actually, in the realm of spiritual reality, our natural abilities do not necessarily advance the work of God.

Take the example of Paul. The apostle Paul was a very capable person. We need only to read his letters to realize how brilliant he was both in management and in his profound insight into spiritual truths. But because of that exceptional ability, God had to cripple him. The Lord had to put a thorn, as it were, into Paul's flesh. And Paul did not like that. He pleaded with God to remove this thorn. But God would not do it. Then Paul understood. 'I know. This is happening because I am proud and I have to be kept humble. Therefore, from now on, I would rather rejoice in my weakness so that God's power may be manifest in me.'

So when the talents are being distributed to various servants, it is not done on the basis of natural ability. It is important to know that the Greek word for 'ability' in this passage is *dunamis*, which means 'power.' Each man according to his power. Each man according to his spiritual capacity. Spiritual capacity is the key idea here.

We read in v. 15, *each according to his own ability*. To each one according to his very own ability or power. The word 'own' does not mean that the person has this power in the innate sense, that somehow, he is born with that or predestined to have it.

In this respect, I would like to show you a passage which talks about the power of the prophet Elijah. We will read Luke 1:17: *And it is he who will go as a forerunner before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers back to the children, and the disobedient to the attitude of the righteous; so as to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.*

The spirit and power (*dunamis*) of Elijah. Here we have the same Greek word, *dunamis*, the ability, the power of Elijah. 'The power of Elijah' means 'God's power that is functioning in Elijah.' So fundamentally, it is God's power. But it is the power of God in Elijah. Therefore it can be properly called the power of Elijah, power which is being given to him by God. It is in a sense truly his.

### **Growing in ability**

This power is not predetermined by God. It can increase. The biblical teaching is that every believer has the potential to be as powerful, as able, as Elijah. What is the determining factor? To answer this question, let us read Romans 4:20.

*Romans 4:20. No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he **grew strong** in his faith as he gave glory to God.*

This verse talks about Abraham. Notice the words 'he grew strong.' It is one word in Greek, *endunamoo*. This word belongs to the same family of words as ability, *dunamis*. *Endunamoo* means 'to increase in power.' Abraham had to face the reality of the Sarah's bareness, which would seem to make God's promise impossible. How can Abraham's descendants be as numerous as the sand of the sea if Sarah does not first give birth to a child? But Abraham did not doubt God's promise. On the contrary, he grew strong, in faith. He became more powerful through faith. Notice that this power comes through faith. Without faith, nothing happens.

The same point is made in Acts 9:22. In Acts 9:22, the apostle Paul had just become a Christian. His name has not yet changed from Saul to Paul. At that point, he met the strong opposition of the Jews. Acts 9:22: *But Saul **increased all the more in strength**, and confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Christ.* 'Increased all the more in strength' in Greek is exactly the same word that we saw in Romans 4:20, *endunamoo*, from *dunamis*, power. Paul was increasing in power. He did not start out that strong. But now, he was growing more and more powerful. His ability increased, through faith.

Here is another statement of Paul. Philippians 4:13: *I can do all things through Him who **strengthens** (endunamoo) me.* Who increases Paul's strength? God increases Paul's strength so that he can do all things. Paul is totally confident that God can do anything through him. Therefore he can do anything through God. When your faith is of that kind, then your strength will grow more and more, and God will entrust more talents to you. Remember the parable. The master gave to each servant according to his own ability, to his own power (Matthew 25:15).

### **The need for productivity**

The last time, we saw the Parable of the Ten Virgins. We saw that one major point hinged on the matter of the extra oil. The extra oil made all the difference in the story. You see, the five foolish virgins and the five wise virgins all had their lamps burning. There was no difference whatsoever at that point. The difference was on the fact that five of them were prepared for the age to come by carrying extra oil. The extra oil was not used at the present time. The extra oil became useful only in

the age to come. The extra. The increase. That is the key idea in the Parable of the Ten Virgins. It is also the key idea in the Parable of the Talents. The extra oil. The extra talents.

Let's go back to the story of the talents. What happens is this. Everyone started out with certain talents being entrusted to them. What made the difference, not at the present time, but at the time of the accounting, at the time of the judgment, was whether they could produce some extra talents. Exactly like the extra oil. The one with five talents produced five extra talents. 'Well done,' the master said. The one with two talents produced two more talents. 'Well done,' the master said. The one with one talent did not produce any extra talent. This one was in trouble. Everyone had extra talents to give to the master, but not this one. 'Throw him into the darkness,' the master said.

What does all that mean? In order to understand the picture, I would like to compare the Parable of the Talents with the Parable of the Pounds. The Parable of the Pounds emphasizes one aspect of the spiritual life, namely that we all start out the same. In that parable, everyone had the same one pound to start with. This point is brought out in the Scriptures. For example, in Acts 11:17, the one pound is compared to the gift of life. We read that we equally have the same gift of life.

*Acts 11:17. If then God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could withstand God?*

We find here the idea that all are equal to start with. The word 'same' is, in Greek, the word 'equality' (*isos*). The Gentile believers and the Jewish believers now have life, the life of equal value. God has treated each one equally by giving him the same Holy Spirit, the same life, an equal portion of life.

So at the beginning, we all get one pound. When we came to the Lord, we had the same gospel, the same Holy Spirit, the same life from Christ. Then, with time, what happens? Some end up with two talents. Others have five talents, ten talents. Some grow more in their spirituality than others. You see, the Parable of the Pounds has to do with the Christian life at the beginning. The Parable of the Talents has to do with the Christian life at a later stage, when there has been an increase of power and things have begun to change, when God is entrusting more and more to the believer. And the difference lies in the type of response of the believer, that which we call faith. Faith is basically a response to God. That response determines the level of increase in power, in ability. As time goes on, the difference becomes wider and wider. This means that in the church, we see a stratification in the level of spirituality. Some are more prominent than others. Some are what I would call spiritual pygmies. They never grew. Some become spiritual giants because God's grace flows in them with little obstruction. And the majority are somewhere in between.

God can do amazing things in each one of us if only our response of faith to Him is without reserve. Paul says in Philippians 2:13, *God is at work in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure*. It is our faith that determines how much God will do in us. He will make us grow in spiritual power to the extent that we allow Him, by faith, to be at work in us. You see that the increase does not come from our own strength. If there is any growth in us, it is all of God's grace through faith.

When we read that 'the master gave to each according to his ability,' the implication is that the master expected every servant to put what he is given to use. Remember what I said about the 'extra,' the extra oil, the extra talent. The Parable of the Talents emphasizes the need for productivity. When God entrusts something to us, He expects that we produce something with it. God has given us eternal life. He expects that we become a channel of that life, that we channel the life that He has given us unto other people.

And this means that we no longer live for ourselves, but that we live for Him and for others. In Romans 14:7-9, Paul writes, *None of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are*

*the Lord's. For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living.*

'That He might be Lord.' Is Jesus Lord in your life? If so, you live to Him. You don't live to yourself anymore.

### ***Take the talent from him***

When God entrusts something to us, whether it is a talent, a pound, or life, it is not for us just to keep it safe. On the day of judgment, if we say to God, 'Thank you for giving me eternal life. I have kept it safe for you,' we will be in big trouble. We will be in the same situation than the servant who was given one talent. The Lord will say, 'Take his life and cast him into the outer darkness where he will weep and gnash his teeth.'

The meaning of that statement is very plain. In the Bible, life is always associated with light. Where there is light, there is life. Where there is life, there is light. That is why Jesus can speak of being 'the light of life' in John 8:12.

This also means that darkness, in the Bible, has to do with death. Death and darkness are very often found together in the Scriptures. The outer darkness is the place of death. In the spiritual sense, it is the place of eternal death, the opposite of eternal life. In 2Peter 2:17, Peter says that this darkness is reserved for the perverse sinners. *These are springs without water, and mists driven by a storm, for whom the black darkness has been reserved.*

The 'weeping and gnashing of teeth' is what these people will do in that place of outer darkness. We are told in Matthew 24:51 that this is the place where the hypocrites will go. And where do the hypocrites go? In Matthew 23:15 and 33, it is written that the place where the hypocrites go is *gehena*, hell. That is where the unfaithful servant of our parable goes.

Also, the Lord Jesus says in Matthew 13:42 and 50 that the place where people are weeping and gnashing their teeth is a furnace of fire. That is why hell is often pictured as a place of fire, a place of destruction.

This means that the pictures of darkness and fire are in fact one picture. The fire symbolizes the destruction in hell. And the darkness symbolizes the same thing. Destruction is the opposite of life. It is to be cut off from the life of God, from His light and from His life. It is a place of spiritual darkness.

That is not a place that anyone would like to end up in. But the teaching of the Parable of the Talents is very clear. We have received the gift of life from God. This talent or this pound has to multiply. It has to produce more talents and more pounds. Life has to be passed on to others. Otherwise, on the day of judgment, we will end up in the same place as the servant who had nothing to show the master.