

Making Good Use of What We Have  
Matthew 25:14-30 January 16, 2011

The last time I preached on this passage was at the end of 1999. That's in the previous century, so when the Deacons asked me to preach on stewardship every few months, I thought it good to return to it.

I have long been amazed at the generosity of this congregation. For most of the years I have been here, per-capita giving has increased. There have been great financial challenges, and this church has met them by both making better use of the resources we already have, and digging deeper in our personal resources and making more of them available for the church's use. The result has been that we have been able to increase our ministry and reach out with the gospel in ways we were not able to before. Of course, as members have left for one reason or another, the increase in per-capita giving has not always been able to keep up.

We also recognize that we are in the midst of a national economy that has been struggling for the last several years. For some of us, our incomes have dropped or remained stable, even as prices on basic and necessary items have increased. I understand all of this.

Still, this passage and other calls from the scripture ring out. We are not our own. We belong to the God who made us and has redeemed us for Himself through the shed blood of Jesus Christ. All that we are and all that we have are His to command. We are merely stewards—caretakers—of the things we have in this world, and we are required to live our lives and make use of our resources by His command and for His glory.

Let's be clear on this from the start. Jesus' main concern in this passage is not the offering plate in church. This parable comes in the midst of a group of parables talking about the coming of the end of the age. It is in response to a question from the disciples about when God will bring everything to an end and pronounce

His judgement on the earth. Jesus' thrust is that we do not know when the kingdom will break into the world, so we must be ready at all times. He told this story as part of His teaching that being ready means making good use of the resources God has given us for His kingdom and glory. None of us are rich by the world's standards. The question Jesus is calling each of us to ask ourselves is, "Am I making good use of what I have?"

To frame this question about resources, Jesus chose a situation involving money. A wealthy landowner was going on a journey and leaving his servants in charge of his property. This was common enough that Jesus used the situation at least twice to describe our situation as caretakers of the things God has placed under our control. It goes all the way back to the account of creation in which God placed Adam and Eve in the garden with the command to till the earth, and subdue it. From the very beginning it has been our command to take care of the things we have been given so that God's creation might be cared for and He might be glorified.

As the man in Jesus' story left, he divided his money among the servants. Notice how Jesus describes it. "*To one he gave five talents of money, to another two talents, and to another one talent, each according to his ability.*" (v.15) The circumstances of our lives and the resources we have to meet them are provided according to our ability. God does not place on us, or expect of us, more than we can bear with His help. Often the tests of life leave us running to Him for help and strength. That is by His design. Still, God knows what our abilities are. He knows what each of us can do and what we cannot do. He also knows what our real limitations are and what we can do, but think we can't.

After passing out the money so that it might be invested, grown, and prepared for his return, the man went on his journey. Jesus tells us that the two men who received the most both doubled what they had been

given. The five talents became ten, and the two talents became four. Then Jesus said, *“But the man who had received the one talent went off, dug a hole in the ground and hid his master’s money.”* (v.18) In doing this, the man was in little danger of losing the money. As long as he remembered where he hid it, it would still be there whenever his master returned and demanded it. The problem is that, hiding there in the ground, the money could not be put to use to build the master’s wealth. It could not fulfill the reason for which the master had given it.

Jesus then described the events of the master’s return after a long time. When the master finally came back after an extended absence, he went to settle accounts with the servants he had placed in charge of managing his money. The one he had given five talents brought him back ten. Likewise, the servant he had left in charge of two talents brought him four. While one had brought five more talents, and the other had only brought two, both had doubled what they had been given, and so the master’s response to each of them was exactly the same. *“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!’”* (v.21 or 23)

Jesus’ teaching here tells us a couple of things. First, it tells us that God rewards those who use the resources He gives them. We have yet to look at the response to the servant who buried his talent, but the other two are praised, rewarded, and invited to share in their master’s happiness. They had taken what they had been given, made the best use of it they could, and their master was pleased with them and called them to share in his joy.

God wants us to use what He gives us. He wants us to bring glory to Him. He wants us to grow the resources of the kingdom so that it can increase and cover the earth. God is happy when we try to make use

of the things we have for Him, and He wants us to share in that happiness.

Then Jesus moved on to the last servant who had received one talent and buried it. Notice what that man said when he brought the talent back to his master. *“‘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 talent in the ground. See, here is what belongs to you.’”* (vv.24,25) The servant began by making excuses. Indeed, from what he said one might wonder if he had the same master! There is no indication that the master had been unfair. Instead, Jesus made it clear that the master knew the tendencies and abilities of his servants. The tendency of this servant to make no effort and then blame others for his failures is why he only got one talent to begin with. He was being given an opportunity to do the right thing and show how he had matured. Instead, he blew it and out of fear that his master would be displeased he did nothing and guaranteed the master’s displeasure.

The master’s response is predictable. *“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. Take the talent from him and give it to the one who has the ten talents. For everyone who has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him. And throw that worthless servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”* (vv.26-30) This may sound harsh to our ears, but that is mainly because we fear the lazy and worthless servant might be us. Instead of doing even the minimum, this servant did nothing and then blamed his inaction on the master.

Before we go on, I want to point out one scenario Jesus left out of His parable. Notice that there were no servants who tried, but failed to double the amount given to them. The master did not give a servant three talents only to come home and find four waiting for him. Whenever any servant tried, the amount doubled. This may be a means of just simplifying the story, so we do not want to read too much into it, but taken with teaching elsewhere, we find that God holds us accountable for being obedient to His call. If we are obedient, then we are not responsible for the outcome. If we try our best, but the end result is not good, God understands and does not hold us accountable. As with the lazy servant, however, God knows if we have truly done our best or if we are making excuses. Remember, He knows our ability and has given us resources accordingly. He requires that we do the best we can with the time, talent, strength, and money He has given us.

How, then, are we to make good use of what we have? The short answer is that we make ourselves and all that we have available to God. When the rich young ruler went to Jesus, Jesus demanded that he sell everything he had and give the money to the poor. The ruler had come to see himself as the owner of the things in his life rather than as the steward of God's resources. The Old Testament standard was the tithe—ten percent of one's income. If you gathered one hundred bushels of grain, ten belonged to God. If you earned ten talents, one was to be returned to God both for His work, and in recognition that it was all His anyway. Jesus assumed the tithe and called us to go beyond it. As with the rich young ruler, we are to have an attitude of heart that gives up all we have in dependence on God and in recognition that He owns all of it, and us, anyway.

For each of us the details of how this will work out will be different. God knows our circumstances and our ability. We cannot use these as excuses for disobedience. Neither can we use one another as

benchmarks for how we are doing. Jesus's giving of Himself and our submission to God and the leading of the Holy Spirit are the only benchmarks we have. I always hear people say that they want to hear Jesus tells them, "Well done, good and faithful servant." If we want to hear those words, however, instead of the condemnation given the lazy servant, then we must submit to the leading of the Holy Spirit and the teaching of scripture and give to God whatever resources He demands of us. This is our proper response to the gospel which tells us that God has made Himself and all the resources of heaven available to us.

I said at the beginning that this is a sermon on stewardship. While the giving of ourselves and resources is not limited to money, it certainly includes it. Jesus chose the example of money to make the point. The church is not about money. We are not a bank whose purpose it is to store, invest, and grow money. We are not a business whose purpose is to earn money and divide it among our investors. We are the body of Christ, the church of the Living God, and we are all about the gospel of Jesus Christ, worshiping Him in spirit and in truth, sharing the gospel with a lost and hurting world, and living out its implications in the communities in which we live and our meeting house is located.

Yet functioning as the body of Christ and living out the implications of the gospel require money. Paul traveled the ancient world collecting money for the church in Jerusalem. Even Jesus and the Apostles had a treasurer to handle their money. Money is not our goal. Our goal is God's glory. Money is a necessary tool toward that end. God has blessed us with wonderful facilities in the heart of the city of Salem. We have a beautiful worship space, a large fellowship hall, and plenty of rooms for meetings and teaching. We are always finding new uses for this building and new ways to share it with the community to meet their needs.

Maintaining this place takes money. We have to buy materials for repairs, and often pay for help to get the work done. We have to pay for electricity to keep the lights on and for oil to heat the building for meetings.

Even more, reaching out to the community and providing food, the gospel, and other services takes resources as well. We have a fantastic volunteer base and we get a lot done with very little money when you compare it to the same services provided by the world, but some money is still needed.

Included in your bulletin I am sure you have already found a copy of our Narrative Budget for this year. It is an explanation of how much money we will need this year and where we expect to spend it. You will see listed there the various needs of this church and her ministries. As you can see, we do a lot with not a lot of resources. Our total budget is \$102,247, of which \$97,012 is for administrative costs, facility costs, and ministry within the congregation, while the remaining \$5,235 is for mission and outreach to the community and around the world. We have cut the operating budget about as much as it can be cut, including reduced hours of the secretary and laying off staff for this year. At the same time, we recognize God's call on us to be a mission station for the gospel of Jesus Christ in Salem, and so we have committed to spending more this year in outreach to the community and sharing the gospel. It is now up to the Holy Spirit and the congregation to raise the money that is needed to do this work.

I call on all of us to examine ourselves and the resources God has given us to make sure we are supporting the work and ministry of this congregation. How much you should give is between you and God. We will not intrude on that decision. For me, I seek to give ten percent of my income each month to the church. I give nine percent to the General Fund, and one percent to the Mission Fund. If you do not give to the Mission Fund I urge you to start. It funds the outreach and

mission arm of the congregation and provides for the things that will strengthen and grow this church into the future. It is through the Mission Fund that we provide for the food ministries, Family Promise, our outreach table which we set up at the Farmers' Market and other community events, and many other ways in which we seek to be faithful in helping the community. It is through this fund that we provide Bibles and other literature for free to all who ask for them. If you do not have donation envelopes, we will get you some. You can designate a portion of your giving to go to the Mission Fund on the envelopes, and if you itemize your deductions, the envelopes allow us to track your giving so it can be deducted from your income taxes.

As the congregation of the First Baptist Church of Salem, New Jersey, we seek to make the best use possible of the resources God has given us, and we have noticed that He has always given us enough to accomplish what He has called us to do. Our resources are thinning, but we have no debt.

This year will be no different. Some of the resources God has for us are in your wallet and mine. Others will come from unexpected sources. God has already given us so much. He has purchased us for Himself and provided eternal life for all who believe. Pray about how He would have you support the work He is doing in you and in the community through this congregation. Give your time by helping with the food distributions or building maintenance. Give yourself by getting involved in Bible studies and Sunday School. Give your money so that our ministry together can be strengthened and we can do more for God, and He can do more with us, going into the future.