

Life in the Kingdom: Investing in the Kingdom

Matthew 25:14-30

June 12, 2016

Dan Hoffman

~God is looking for people who will risk their kingdoms to invest in the possibility of increasing His~

Please open your Bibles to Matthew 25. It's on page 702 in the pew Bible.

...

2000 years ago God became a man, and the veil between the divine and the mundane was torn. And with this tear came a torrent of heaven pouring out onto earth. God wasn't living in the Holy of Holies anymore, He had broken out. And this is what had been foretold.

600 years earlier God told Ezekiel a time was coming when He would put His Spirit, the Holy Spirit, inside His followers. And when this happened they would be empowered to follow His decrees and keep His laws like was never before possible.¹ And the word that Jesus attaches to this reality is "kingdom" – when God resides within us and works around us we are living in His kingdom.

And what this means is that heaven isn't something people have to die to experience, it is something that those who are dying to experience can have right now and enjoy forever. All it requires is our willingness to seek it first, and trade in all the treasure earth has to offer. But if you think this sounds like a big sacrifice you haven't seen the kingdom. So Jesus said:

The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field. (Matthew 13:44)

In other words the kingdom has such incredible value that those who catch a glimpse of it joyfully invest everything they've got for the chance to lay hold of it. Life in the kingdom right now is worth the exchange of everything else.

But this doesn't mean that if we give our lives to Jesus then we get health and wealth and happiness for our whole lives. In fact many of the most devoted Christ imitators suffer incredibly for their faith. Some live in poverty and sickness and some lose their lives. But this shouldn't surprise us, after all the Christ they are imitating did the same.

But this also doesn't mean these people are missing out on life in the kingdom. After all in spite of what He went through Jesus lived in the kingdom more than anyone else ever has or ever will. But even though He lived His life in joy, it was for the joy set before Him that He endured the cross.² He acknowledges that without the prospect that there is more than this life, what we get here and now is not enough.

¹ Ezekiel 36:27

² Hebrews 12:2

This is why Paul says:

If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied. (1 Corinthians 15:19)

And so in the kingdom parables Jesus tells in Matthew 25 there is an emphasis placed on the “not yet” aspect of the kingdom; the promise that there is abundantly more to come.

...

Let's pick the story up in verse 14:

[Read Matthew 25:14-15]

Now the “it” that verse 14 starts with is a reference back to verse 1 where we read “At that time the kingdom of heaven will be like...” And so “it” here is the kingdom of heaven. As we have seen throughout this series Jesus spoke more about the kingdom than He did about any other topic.

And this is a very familiar story about the kingdom. It's so familiar that even if you weren't following along in the pew Bible you probably noticed that there is a word in verse 15 that my translation renders differently than what we are familiar with. Anyone know which word I'm talking about?

...

Now the translators in my version, which is the updated NIV, have made a very deliberate choice in changing this word because they realized that the entire parable is built on it, and “talent”, in English, doesn't help us out. So we need to start by dealing with the misconception of “talent.”

...

In English “talent” refers to a “natural ability or aptitude” that a person has. And so when we read this parable with the word “talent” we are liable to think its point is that we should use our abilities to build God's kingdom. So someone might say “I can play the piano”, or “I have a gift for speaking or making money or teaching” and my goal is to develop this talent and use it for the glory of God.

Now this is a great idea, but it isn't really what this parable is about. And that's because in the first century a “talent” did not have anything to do with a natural ability or aptitude; instead it referred to a large sum of money. And this is why the updated NIV translates this “bag of gold” instead of “talent.”

So, in Greek accounting a talent was the largest measure of money anyone talked about, and commentators argue as to exactly what that amount is as we don't have any records that specifically show us, but the best guess is it was worth somewhere around 10,000 denarii. And a denarii was a day's wages.³

If this calculation is correct then in today's currency if you make \$25 an hour or \$50,000 a year, then 10,000 day's wages, or one talent, would be roughly two

³ Brunner, F.D. “The Churchbook: Matthew 13-28” (Grand Rapids: WB Eerdmans), 2004. pg 553

million dollars – that’s equivalent to 40 years employment or a lifetime’s wages. The point is that when Jesus’ hearers heard “talent” they thought about a huge sum of money, not a specific ability they had.

...

So if the talent, or bag of gold, isn’t natural ability then what does it refer to?

Well, it turns out we don’t have to guess as there are five clues scattered throughout the text that give us direct insight. And on this one I’ve been helped out by Pastor Ray Stedman – some of you may know that name.⁴

The first clue comes in verse 14 which is packed with details of context. So we read that a man, who will later be referred to as the Master – an obvious reference to Jesus – was going on a journey. At this point in the story the Master is with the servants and handing responsibilities out to them. After this He goes away for an undisclosed period of time where the servants have the opportunity to put what He has given to work. And then from verse 19 on the parable is looking forward to when Christ will return as judge and usher the faithful into eternal life and damn the wicked to eternal death – that’s the general meaning.

Now specifically, notice that at the end of verse 14 we read that the Master “called *His* servants and entrusted *His* wealth to them.” And these two pronouns are particularly significant when it comes to figuring out what the talent or the bag of gold is in this parable.

So first, it is “His wealth”, the Master’s “wealth” that is being divided between the servants – the bags of gold are His all along, even when they are in the possession of the servants. This makes it clear that what is being spoken of is not the innate abilities of the servants, but something that is and remains the Master’s. And the sums of money also point to this as no servant would ever own 2 or 4 or 10 million dollars worth of gold.

Second, notice that while all people have natural abilities, here the Master gives His gold to His servants not to everyone. Only those in His house receive what He has. So again there is a distinction between the natural abilities that all people have and what the Master gives here. These bags of gold are specifically God’s resources that are given to God’s servants.

The third clue comes in the next verse where the Master divides His bags of gold between the three servants. One gets five, the next two and the final one. And the verse ends with the words “each according to his ability.” So Jesus is differentiating between two things, one is the bag of gold, and the other is the basis for how much gold gets given – the ability of the servant.

...

⁴ <http://www.raystedman.org/new-testament/matthew/living-dangerously> (Accessed June 10, 2016)

When I was a student I worked as a server at earls in Vancouver. And while doing this I noticed that the work schedule was stacked in favor of the great servers because they were good for the company. They had learned how to up-sell their customers in a way that resulted in a better bottom line for the boss – and of course they also got a good bunch of tips for themselves.

And so when the manager was divvying out the best sections in the restaurant – the places everyone wanted to sit – and the best hours to work – the times when the most people would come in it was always the strongest servers who got them. The result was strong servers had the opportunity to wait on a lot of customers and make a lot of money, while weak servers had much less opportunity and made less money.

Similarly here the servant with the greatest natural ability receives the most gold, the slightly less talented servant receives a little less gold, and the final servant who wasn't that gifted at all receives the least gold.

...

Now is this fair? Actually yes; and it's insightful. Had the Master given the same amount of gold to each servant in spite of their differing abilities the burden of responsibility would have been huge on the untalented servant and perhaps insultingly boring to the most talented.

And at earls if every server received the same section the best servers would be under-utilized and the company would suffer, while the weak servers would be flustered and the company would suffer.

So here the Master knows exactly what the servant is capable of, and divvies His gold out in proportion to their ability.

Now there is a fourth clue that gives insight into what this gold refers to and that is that the Master gives it to His servants and not His children. Servants are employees, they work for Him. What this means is He isn't giving out gold, He is giving out opportunity and responsibility; He expects them to do something with what He has given. Like a business man He wants His kingdom to increase while He is away.

So then, in the parable the bags of gold are things that God gives to His servants, proportionate to their abilities, that they can use to increase His kingdom.

So what could that be? What is it that God gives us, that is connected to our abilities, but isn't our abilities, that we can use it to increase His kingdom?

...

It's not anything physical; it's "divine appointments." The bags of gold or talents the Master is divvying out are divine appointments. Now a divine appointment is

a moment where we are in the right place at the right time, with the right ability, and are therefore able to accomplish something beyond our ability for God.

Now there is a parallel in the natural world; when you have a natural ability the next thing you look for is an opportunity to use that ability. So, if you were a great athlete, you would look for a trainer. And if you were an entrepreneur you would look for an idea to sell. And if you were a great musician you would look for a producer. And you look for these opportunities because you know that without them you will never get to use your ability to its full potential.

So imagine the most talented runner ever was born, not in North America but Uganda. And so instead of having the opportunity to train and find a great coach they spent their life trying to find enough food to survive. Obviously their natural talent is not going to result in an Olympic gold medal.

Or imagine an incredibly talented 22 year old musician who in spite of her promise ends up shot dead by a delusional fan like happened in Orlando this last week. You see while you need natural ability to succeed, without the opportunity to use that ability the ability is impotent. Talent is nothing without opportunity.

Now we all love stories about unknown little guys getting their big break. And this is the idea that shows like American Idol or The Dragon's Den are built around. They are full of talented individuals looking for opportunities.

But who chooses who gets these opportunities? Well on the shows it's the judges, but what isn't shown is the whole string of opportunities that enable the contestants to even appear on the show. They had to be able to start voice lessons when they were six. And their parents had to be able to afford this so their dad had to get that promotion, and on and on it goes. So isn't it really God who ordains the opportunities we get?

I mean none of us chose which country we were going to be born in. None chose whether we would have a disability or not. None chose how wealthy our parents were? And if we don't have control over any of these things than who of us has control over the opportunities we may be given? Isn't it only God?

...

But there is another side to the coin as well. Is it not also true that two equally talented people may respond to their talents differently? One may work to develop it and put themselves in places where opportunities abound, and the other may choose just to watch TV shows about people receiving opportunities. So the one is much more likely to get their big break than the other – though nothing is guaranteed and they might both not get anything.

Now all that's on the natural side, but we are talking about the kingdom of God in this parable, and so these moments aren't opportunities where we can become great, they are divine appointments where we are in the right place, at the right time, with the right abilities and therefore able to make God great.

And here is where we get a fifth and final clue about what these bags of gold mean. The story is built up around an element of risk. This becomes increasingly apparent in the third servant's speech, but it is just as present in the first two servants – though it isn't mentioned.

In order for the servants to produce an increase on what they were given they had to risk investing. And risk for Jesus is the willingness to value the kingdom we can't see over the kingdom we can – it is the choice to give up the treasures of earth for the treasures of heaven. So when the man found the treasure in the field he sold everything he had and bought the field.

In this way the bags of gold in the parable are divine appointments that God gives us where we have the choice to use our natural abilities to increase His kingdom instead of our own. And in a nutshell this is what this parable is about.

So in the time that remains I'm going to argue that: **God is looking for people who will risk their kingdoms to invest in the possibility of increasing His.**

Let's dig into what happens to these three servants. Look at verse 16:

[Read Matthew 25:16-23]

So the first and second servants get a great return on their Master's investment. The one who receives 5 bags of gold, or 10 million dollars, returns with 20 million to show for himself; and the one given charge over two bags of gold comes back with four. So what was it that made these two servants successful?

...

Well, certainly they were naturally gifted to begin with – that's way the Master gave them great responsibility. But this is an important distinction. While God uses gifted people He doesn't play favorites with them. And we see this in that both servants receive the exact same reward. In verses 21 and 23 both servants are placed in charge of "many things" and "share in the Master's happiness." And so in spite of the third servant only receiving one talent he could have received this same reward. The one who received 5 bags wasn't favored over the other servants, his great ability just meant he was given more responsibility.

So often rich people pray "Thank you God for the blessings I have received." But the problem is our money isn't a blessing. Two weeks ago we saw that 100%, not 10%, of what we have is God's. And so wealth isn't a blessing, it is a responsibility. In Luke Jesus tells us:

From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked. (Luke 12:48)

So here the first two servants receive multiple divine appointments. God surrounds them with opportunities to partner with Him in increasing His kingdom, and they have to choose again and again to not build their own kingdoms, but instead to build God's. And in the story they do; they both utilize all of the opportunities God gives and bring back a great return on His investment.

...

Now that's all theoretical, so what does it look like to seize these God given divine appointments, that are linked to our abilities, and build His kingdom?

...

Well, this could happen when you are confronted with a moral choice like "should I give in and do what I know is wrong, or should I be true to what God wants?" On paper we all know what the right answer is, but usually the wrong answer comes with an immediate reward which makes it hard. So if we cheat on our test we get a better grade. And so we must choose, do I build my kingdom or God's?

But let's leave the right and wrong aside because often there is nothing morally wrong on either side of the equation. So a nurse might feel a call to missions in a slum – the hope being that her ability to nurse may lead to people encountering Christ through her. But while feeling this call she might struggle with whether it would be better to play it safe and keep her current job? After all her family needs her and something bad might happen in the slum. And her current job would pay more and afford a lot more comfort for her children. So the question then is will she give up income and safety to invest in the possibility of increasing God's kingdom?

Or a little less dramatic, you might struggle with whether to commit to a Care Group. You know that surrounding yourself with Christian community will probably strengthen your faith and those around you, but your schedule is already busy and so you are tempted to spend Tuesday night resting and watching movies with friends. The question is will you build your kingdom or invest your ability in something with the potential to increase God's?

Or, as we talked about two weeks ago, perhaps it is the question of whether you will live simply in order to free up God's resources for generosity. The hope would be that in giving you may have the opportunity to partner with God in changing the world. So do you build your kingdom or invest in God's?

In each of these instances it is our natural ability that puts us in the place where the divine appointments may occur. None of them are guaranteed. No one gets to choose to change someone's life or connect deeply or lead someone to Christ, but we can put ourselves in places where these things might happen. And when we do we give up the advancement of our own kingdom to invest in God's.

And here we come to the second thing that leads to success for the two servants – and it is most obvious in the first servant’s story. When he received the five bags of gold we read he “*went at once* and put his money to work.” Some other translations say “he immediately went” to work.” And this is actually the most exciting word in the story. It’s a word of passion and enthusiasm.

The man is so thrilled with the honour of responsibility he has been given, that he runs out and throws himself into increasing His Master’s wealth. He’s just like the man who found the treasure in the field. In his joy he went and sold all he had and bought the field.

And if you would try to sit this man down and tell him “now consider carefully what you are doing, you really are going to have to sell everything you have in order to get that treasure,” he would just look back at you like you were crazy. He can’t believe the good luck he has, or he can’t believe the divine appointment he has been given, to get treasure that he knows is worth so much more than everything else he has.

And so the first and second servants joyfully invest their natural ability by putting themselves in situations where they might get a return on their Master’s money. They joyfully risk their kingdom for the prospect of building His. And it’s their willingness to risk that gains the reward.

...

But why is risk such a big deal to God? Why does the Master reward the servants who put their abilities to work investing in the possibility of increasing His kingdom?

It’s because in doing this they prove they have faith. Faith for Jesus is the decision to value the kingdom we can’t see over the kingdom we can. And risk is the way we do this. God wants us to gamble that working for the possibility of increasing His kingdom will be worth more than working to increase our own.

...

Let’s turn now to the third man in the story; verse 24

[Read Matthew 25:24-30]

Now at first it might seem like the Master is being harsh with this servant who has at least had the foresight to save his Master’s money. But it is the servant’s refusal to risk that has resulted in the unthinkable – he has squandered his divine appointment and refused to use his ability to increase His Master’s kingdom.

So really what this servant held back from God was himself. His Master invested in him; God extended the offer to partner with Him in what He was doing, but this servant deliberately put it away from himself. He hid it in the ground. He cared more about his own affairs than his Master’s. And as a result he put no effort into the increase of God’s kingdom.

Now he's got a cute speech ready for the Master in order to justify everything, but God is unimpressed. Basically he blames it all on God just like Adam did back in the Garden – “It's this woman You gave me who made me do it.”

And here the servant says “You're unreasonable! You expect people to do Your work while You get the return. And if they fail You'll be mad! So I was afraid to risk what You gave me. But I've outsmarted You. I hid Your money so I could give it all back – see here it is. You've got nothing on me now – we're even!

Now this might seem smart, but the Master isn't interested in debating His character with the lazy servant and instead exposes the real problem which is that this man had no intention of being His servant in the first place.

You see a servant's job is to serve. And a servant who doesn't increase His Master's kingdom is worthless. So this servant was a phony from the beginning. He may have lived in the same quarters as the other passionate servants, he may have attended the same church, but his refusal to give up his own kingdom for the opportunity of increasing his Master's, was the proof that He was never one of them.

So brothers and sisters, God is looking for people who will risk their kingdoms to invest in the possibility of increasing His. He wants women and men of faith who will see the value of His kingdom and gladly give up the kingdoms of this world to get it. He wants people who will say like the missionary Jim Elliot did “He is no fool who gives up what he cannot keep, to gain that which he cannot lose.”

So friends, if you want to really live, if you want to reside in the abundance of divine appointments, and bask in the joy of the Master, then choose to use every ability you have to get into situations where God might show up and allow you to build His kingdom. All those divine appointments are only God's to give, but we have the choice as to whether we will take them or not.