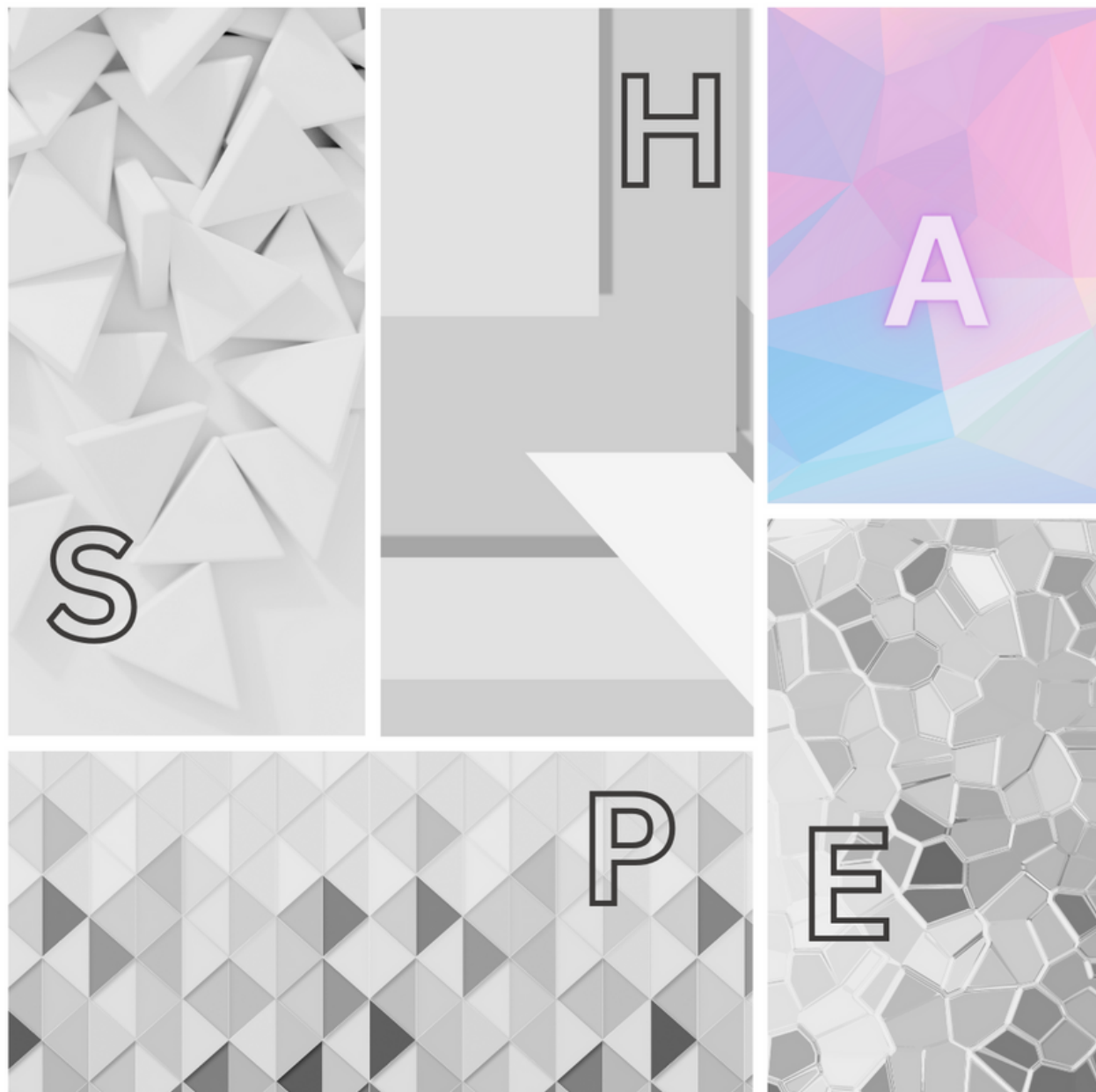


SHAPE

your gifts for God's good purposes



PART FOUR **ABILITIES**





Part Four: Abilities

By Pastor David Fields

Matthew 25:14-30

Abilities – and how they differ from Spiritual Gifts

Every human being is created by God, and therefore, every talent or ability is God-given. Theologians call this “common grace.” God endows all humans with brilliant capacities to do beautiful things for the good of His world and for His glory.

The difference is, Christians – through the presence of the Holy Spirit – are also “gifted” with some special abilities. Sometimes these are completely apart from any natural ability. Other times the Spirit enhances and propels these natural abilities in a specific way. They often intersect and overlap.

I. The Warning – Don’t Waste What You’re Entrusted

In the ancient world, a wealthy landowner might go on a business trip and leave his property and investments in the care of his servants. These servants, it is assumed, have a real responsibility to take care of their master’s business.

The same is true for each one of us. Like, whatever you have – financial means, abilities, a level of privilege that others don’t because of where you were born, or the education you received, of the space you sit in culturally – whatever you have, we are all responsible to God for what we do with that, how we invested it.

A note on theology and parables:

Parables often use surprising characters to illustrate elements of God’s activity, but these characters – like this landowner – are *not* meant to be read as a fully orbited “theology” lesson on the character and nature of God. The way the parable functions will hint at *some* elements of God’s character – that’s true. Like His gracious gift of “talents”, and His joy at our service. It also illustrates the seriousness of His message – that there is accountability, and His justice is real.

But again: this is not the sum total of what God is like. We need the whole of Scripture to see that picture emerge. We particularly need to see how Jesus is showing us God’s character and notice how He redeems us.

The “Wicked, Lazy” Servant

The “wickedness” of the third servant is due primarily to his attitude toward his master, which in turn leads to laziness and squandering his opportunity.

He reveals his attitude with the words, “I know you are a hard man, harvesting where you haven’t sown, and gathering where you have not scattered seed.”

Is that a true assessment? All the scholars I read agreed that this is a *misconception*, a *misrepresentation* of the master’s character. Notice, when the master responds to the man – and his excuses – he doesn’t agree with that servant about being a “hard man.”

“The swift justice meted out to the lazy servant puts a merciful end to any notion that the disobedient and the dishonest will be able to blackmail their way into the Kingdom of heaven by manipulating the goodness of God or playing on divine pity. God’s goodness is too clever to be taken in by such nursery tricks. Divine pity will forgive sins, but it will not condone them.”

– D.C. Steinmetz

Love and accountability are not opposites. God’s love seeks and restores us; makes it possible for us to live lined up with, in sync with, His kingdom. The question is: will we love Him? Will our lives be a response to His love for us?

From Fear to Faith

There’s this song by Jimmy Eat World with this haunting lyric: “We’ve done nothing wrong. But we’ve done nothing. We can’t look away. But we’re just looking. It’s second nature to say, “Hey, hey, hey we’ve done nothing wrong.”

Or, to go back to the 1600’s, the English theologian Richard Baxter says something similar: “To do no harm is the praise of a stone, not of a man.”

Often enough, we end up motivated by our fears. We’ll chose to take the road less risky or avoid altogether something that is right and good and true, because, well, we know we might fail, or it might hurt.

A fear of failure or of looking foolish can work powerfully against the kind of life Jesus is calling us into. But it’s true: “Risk is at the heart of discipleship.”
– R.T. France.

Following Jesus, apprenticing ourselves to Him, it will mean...you are not in control of where your life goes and what it will be about anymore. You are trusting in another who is leading you into unknown territory to impossible things to the glory of God.

Missionary and scholar, Edward Schweizer said in the last decade: “Jesus is saying that a religion concerned only with not doing anything wrong in order that its practitioner may one day stand vindicated ignores the will of God.”

II. Your Contribution to the Kingdom Renewal Project

The landowner in this text is entrusting a total of 8 talents that are at his disposal for investing.

Fun fact: our English word for “talent” – meaning any endowment we might have, any of our God-given abilities – it comes directly from this parable – from the Greek word *talanton*. So, what was originally only a financial word becomes an easy bridge to thinking about all of our God-given “talents” as well.

A “talent” was a weight of precious metal essentially equivalent of half a lifetime of wages for a farmer in the ancient context. That’s *one* talent. The liquid assets of these 8 talents could roughly be translated to 4.3 million dollars. One talent is just over half a million dollars. To convert all that into our minds, like, a typical, middle-class Canadian income, over half your lifetime, and we’re looking at one talent being something equivalent to between 1.2 and 2 million dollars.

You need to see what Jesus is saying. What is in your hands – the abilities He has given you, the privileges you’ve been given – are of incredibly great value.

The Temptation to Comparison

Some of us might look around a room like this, look at our community, and see the incredible gifts and talents of others, and there will be **a temptation to compare rather than celebrate those differences**. It can be hard not to sometimes, right?



Like, envy isn't just about money or stuff is it? Far more often it's about other things – natural ability, body shape or looks, intellectual ability, musical talent, or even, perhaps, things like what family we grew up in. It's easy to point to how social media has compounded that tendency to comparison. Fair enough.

But honestly, it's nothing new. Just listen to how Paul puts it:

“Now if the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. And if an ear should say, “Because I'm not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? But in fact, God has placed the parts of the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be.”

– 1 Corinthians 12:15-18

So, what do we do with this temptation to compare?

- **We listen** to the voice of God instead of the voices in our own head telling us that we are a nobody.
- **We confess** where we have let comparison or envy have a foothold on our lives.
- **We commit** to using what we do have for God's glory and the good of those around us.

“God demonstrates His own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” (Romans 5:8). Now, when we root our deepest identity in his love for us, we find a real freedom – freedom to stop competing with others to feel we are worthy, and instead, the freedom to serve others with love and humility.”

– Lisa Coralie and David Fields, *Real Freedom is Finding our Deepest Identity*, Kamloops This Week, 2014

III. Sharing the Master's Joy

The first two servants receive the exact same commendation:

“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!” – Matthew 25:21; 23

Identical words. Identical invitation to celebrate with joy. Identical reward of being given more responsibility into the future.

It's not a matter of the total amount achieved; it's being faithful to using what you do have. Engaging your potential and giftedness for God's glory. Paul will say it like this:

“Whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.”

– 1 Corinthians 10:31

There's the time when Jesus feeds a group of over 5000 people in the wilderness. Some of you will remember that His disciples think He's crazy – which is fair enough. But He says to them, “What do you have?” And they find this little boy who has five loaves and two fish. And the little boy offers the little he has (John 6:9). He offers it to Jesus, who then turns to multiply it over, and over, and over, and over – and when given back to Jesus, it was more than enough.

What's in your hands?

Ask yourself: What will I do with these abilities – the time, talents, and treasures He's given me?

May we be those who don't even dream of burying them, but who live as “good and faithful servants” – investing it all for the joy of our Master.



DISCUSSION

Open up

Think of someone who has had a positive impact on you, or the broader community. What natural abilities/gifts/talents did they have and how did they use these for the sake of others and the glory of God?

What might you learn from their example?

Dig In

1. Read **Matthew 25:14-25**. Take a few minutes to just compare the attitude of each servant toward the master.
 - a. What defining characteristics do you see in them?
 - b. In the message, we heard that the central issue for the third servant, who buried the “talent” he was given, was primarily about his misperception of his master – calling him “hard” and speaking of his fear. This led to his excuse for not putting his talent to use. How might you best develop the right set of attitudes and perspectives on who God really is? (i.e. What role does regular, gathered worship play? What about regular prayer and reflection on scripture? How have these helped you?)
 - c. Do you have a tendency to find excuses to not use what you have been given for God’s glory? How is this text helping you rethink that?

2. Notice the promise of future responsibility over “many things” that Jesus speaks of in v.21 and v.23. This hints at the fact that we are made to reign with God over His creation (Genesis 1:26-28 and Rev 22:1-5) that we heard about in our first message. Read the follow quote:

“Our faithfulness over a “few things” in the present phase of our life develops the kind of character that can be entrusted with “many things.” We are, accordingly, permitted to “enter into the joy of our Lord” (Matt 25:21)....His plan for us is to develop, as apprentices to Jesus, to the point where we can take our place in the ongoing creativity of the universe.”

– Dallas Willard

What do you think, or how do you feel, about the idea that how you use your God-given abilities now is preparing you to be a certain kind of person – someone who can use your gifts into all of eternity? Why?

3. One of the “fears” that can keep us from using our gifts/talents/abilities is the fear of failure. But the life of discipleship is a life of taking risks – of trusting God to do things that are hard/uncomfortable or what looks impossible apart from God.
 - a. Are there ways you are holding back from using your ‘talents’?
 - b. How might you like to better invest your talents for the building of God’s kingdom?



PRAYER

Prayer

Praise God for the talents you have been given, and for the talents you see present in our community. Take some time to pray for courage over each member of your group. Ask God to give you the courage to use your abilities for God's glory, even when it might be scary. Pray for any other specific needs or requests your group may have.

A further note on the literary context and what this text has to say about salvation:

The parable of the "talents" as it is often called, is the second of three parables Jesus tells his followers about being ready for his coming ("At that time the kingdom of heaven will be like..." Matt 25:1). Each one ends with a warning of final judgment for those who do not really know Jesus personally, and therefore who do not act in accordance with the ways of the kingdom of heaven.

The first focuses on preparedness for Jesus' return (25:1-13), the second about responsibility to use what he has entrusted us (25:14-30), and the third focuses on the clinching evidence of kingdom life – caring for the most needy among Jesus' followers (25:15-46).

Jesus is teaching us that there is a real need to decide if we will line ourselves up with him and his kingdom ways. Our salvation comes as a gift from God based on Jesus' self-sacrificial love, and the rest of the Gospel of Matthew demonstrates that. Our response to that gift will require our whole life offered back to him and his ways; he will be transforming us into wholly new creations! That's the only reasonable response to the God who loves us by giving himself wholly for our sake in his Son Jesus. How we prepare for Jesus' return – the responsible using our 'talents', and care for our sisters and brothers in Christ – reveals where, or better "in whom" our true allegiances are truly located.