

‘Occupy.’ This word took on new meaning in 2011. Time magazine named ‘The Protester’ as the ‘Person of the Year’ for 2011. Protesters all around the world took the streets to protest on various issues. Some of these protesters are informally known as the ‘Occupy’ movement, and some have even suggested that the ‘Occupy’ movement is a fulfillment of the command of Jesus to His followers to ‘Occupy until I come!’ (Luke 19.13).

Some protesters in 2011 have been peaceful, and in some locations the protests were not peaceful. In the UK, many will remember with horror the collapse of law and order in cities across the UK in early summer 2011, with rioting, looting, murder and arson reported from mobs that included 9 year olds. One store in London hung this sign on the window: ‘Due to the imminent collapse of civilization, we regret to announce that we will close today at 4pm and reopen tomorrow at 10am. We apologize for any inconvenience caused by the collapse of civilization.’ This apocalyptic imagery encourages many to focus on the end of the world and how they are to live in anticipation of the coming end.

In every age, there are those who proclaim the imminent end of everything. Whilst this is true – Jesus is coming soon, that is His promise, the suggestion of many apocalyptic enthusiasts is that as the end is coming, we are to withdraw unto ourselves, preferably away from human society. Such types tend to establish communes, buy remote compounds, stock up (if possible) on weaponry and canned food, and hunker down in anticipation of the coming apocalypse.

Such speculation however provides a convenient escape from responsibilities in the present. If the end of the world is imminent, there is no need to speak truth to power, to make any effort to create a just society, to work for peace and reconciliation, to mourn with those who mourn, to rejoice with those who rejoice, to serve our neighbor, to protect or preserve our natural world. We are not called to withdraw, but to ‘Occupy until I come.’ But what does this mean?

In the Gospels, we find that the disciples were also apocalyptic enthusiasts, as we read in Matthew 24.3: ‘When he was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately, saying, "Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?"

In response to the disciples’ questions, Jesus tells a series of parables in Matt. 25 about how we are to live whilst we await His return. Matt. 25.1-13 = the Parable of the 10 Bridesmaids: we are to remain awake spiritually, and not to trust yesterday’s spiritual experience as sufficient for today’s spiritual challenges. Matt. 25.14-30 = the Parable of the Talents: we are not to withdraw to remote communes in New Mexico, but to occupy usefully until Jesus returns. Matt. 25.31-46 = the Parable of the Sheep and Goats: we are to serve those less fortunate than ourselves using the gifts and talents God has blessed us with until Jesus comes.

Today we are going to focus on the Parable of the Talents.

Jesus begins the parable with these words (v. 24): "For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them....’ The background here is that in 40 BC, Herod had travelled to Rome to request of Augustus Caesar the position of King of the Jews, based in Jerusalem. He confessed his dedicated support for Mark Anthony in the Roman civil war against Augustus Caesar, and concluded by asking, ‘I ask you not to remember whose friend I was, but what a good friend I was.’ Augustus was duly impressed and gave Herod the throne. Jesus uses a political scene that his hearers were familiar with. In the parable, the man going to a far country represents Jesus Himself. The man who is going to a far country is confident of his return – for instead of taking his wealth with him, he entrusts it to his slaves. So Jesus is confident of His return.

The departing master summons not his friends, but his slaves – those whom he has bought for himself. We read in 1 Cor. 6.20 that we were bought with a price, and in 1 Peter 1.18-19 what that price was. All humanity was bought with this infinite price – but not all recognize the claims of God. It is those who profess to be followers of Jesus Christ who are represented as the slaves / servants in the parable.

Jesus continues with the parable (v.25): ‘To one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away.’ To his servants are committed the master’s goods, to be put to use for the master. Every Christian has his / her place in the plan of salvation. No Christian is so insignificant that they have no place in God’s purposes. Every Christian is to work in harmony with God for the salvation of souls. Just as surely as Jesus is preparing a place for us to live in heaven above, so Jesus designates a place for Christian service and labor for all His followers on earth below whilst we await His return.

The parallel telling of this parable is found in Luke 19, where we have the famous words, ‘Occupy until I come.’ This may be better translated as ‘Do business with these until I come back.’ Christians are not to withdraw to remote compounds and hunker down – we are to ‘occupy until I come.’ This does not mean joining the ‘Occupy Wall Street’ movement, but it does mean within the context of the parable that we are to engage in productive labor for our master as we await His return.

The parallel passage in Luke 19 reveals that not only are we to engage in productive labor for God, we are to do so in a hostile environment. In 4 BC, on the death of Herod the Great, his son Archelaus made the same trip as his father to Rome to argue that he should inherit Herod’s kingdom instead of his half-brother Antipas. The Jews however knew that Archelaus was a cruel man, and sent a subsequent delegation to Rome to petition that Archelaus not be made king. Their message to Caesar was succinctly summarized in the parable by Jesus in Luke 19:14: ‘We do not want this man to rule over us.’

Jesus assumes his disciples know the story of Archelaus and of the delegation that followed him on his far-off journey to undermine his position. In an era of political instability, when nobody knows who will return as ruler from the far-off journey, it would make sense to bury the money and wait out the conflict to see who will return triumphant – the master or his enemies.

Anyone who thought about starting a business as the friend of the absent master would be cautious and stay out of the public eye. All the ‘smart money’ would be buried, awaiting the final outcome. Yet, the master entrusts his talents to his servants, and sets them to work. He wants to know, ‘Are you willing to take the risk and openly declare yourselves to be my loyal servants during my absence in a world where many oppose me and my rule?’

Today, many of us live and minister in communities where the majority say of Jesus that ‘we do not want this man to rule over us.’ As the Master distributes the talents, He is saying in effect to His servants that ‘Once I return, having received kingly power and authority, it will be easy to declare yourself publicly as my servants. I am more interested in how you conduct yourselves when I am away and you have to pay a high price to openly identify with me.’ Christianity this side of the 2nd coming is a persecuted and militant faith, not a triumphant faith.

Returning to Matthew 25, Jesus goes on to describe the trading activities of the faithful servants, and it is unlikely that He is using the parable to endorse capitalism, despite what some may say of this parable. The one with 5 talents went and traded and gained 5 more talents. He was open about his loyalty to the absent master, and traded in his name for his gain in a hostile world that rejected the absent master.

Applied to us today, what are those talents? Firstly, they are the spiritual gifts Jesus bestowed on His church at Pentecost. There are 3 primary passages in the New Testament that describe spiritual gifts in detail: 1 Cor. 12-14, Ephesians 4.1-13, and Romans 12. God bestows upon every member of His church in every age spiritual gifts which each member is to employ in loving ministry for the common good of the church and humanity. Given by the Holy Spirit, the gifts provide all abilities and ministries needed by the church to fulfill its divinely ordained task. These gifts include such ministries as faith, healing, compassion, proclamation, teaching, administration, reconciliation, leadership and self-sacrificing service for the help and encouragement of people.

Some members are called of God and gifted by the Spirit for functions recognized by the church in pastoral, evangelistic, apostolic and teaching ministries to equip other members for service, build up the church to spiritual maturity, and to foster unity and faith. When members use their gifts faithfully, the church is protected from false doctrine, and grows in faith and love. No matter one's abilities or skills, without the Spirit one's ministry is dry and without fruit. Without the presence of the Holy Spirit, no heart will be touched, no sinner won for Christ. However, if they are filled with the Holy Spirit, the poorest, least educated and most humble believer will exhibit a spiritual power that will convict the hearts of sinners.

How did those disciples receive the Holy Spirit? By coming together in prayer, in repentance, in earnestly asking for the Holy Spirit, in seeking reconciliation and putting away anything that would hinder the presence of the Holy Spirit. As then, so ought we to do likewise, wherever we live, whoever our colleagues may be.

Each servant received a different number of talents. Each believer receives different gifts from God. We are not to lament our seeming lack of gifts compared to others, or boast in our giftedness compared to others, but we are to be faithful in utilizing the gifts God has given us. 'The gift is acceptable according to what one has – not according to what one does not have' (2 Cor. 8.12). The question is not 'What have I received' but 'What am I doing with what I have received?' God expects that all believers strive to develop our talents and gifts to better serve our brother and sister.

To be faithful in our gifts, we are to actively develop our mental faculties. We read in 'Christ's Object Lessons' the following quote: 'True education is the preparation of the physical, mental and moral powers for the performance of every duty. It is the training of body, mind and soul for divine service. This is the education that will endure unto eternal life' (p. 141).

We are also to develop our powers of speech that our words may have the aroma of life to dying sinners. Our characters are to become more Christlike – 'The silent witness of a true, unselfish, godly life carries an almost irresistible influence' (COL, 147). Our time is not to be wasted, but used solemnly for the salvation of others. We never know when God will ask of us, 'This night thy soul shall be required of thee' (Lk. 22.20). We are to stand as minute-men, ready for service at a moment's notice.

And, perhaps most painfully for many, our money is to be used primarily for kingdom purposes. In the hands of true disciples, money is food for the hungry, drink for the thirsty, clothing for the naked, housing for the homeless. How a man uses his money is a good indicator of his spiritual health. Every penny spent on display and self-indulgence deprives the spender of the opportunity to do good, thus robbing God of the honor and glory which should flow back to Him through the use of His entrusted talents.

Jesus continues with the parable in Matt. 25.20-21: 'Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, 'Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents.' His master said to him, 'Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.'

The master returns, and wishes to settle accounts with His servants. He is seeking to discover the extent to which they have openly and publicly declared their loyalty to him during the risky period of his absence. He is now checking their obedience to his command and their loyalty to his person. A full ledger will reveal that the community knew this servant was loyal to the absent master – a depleted ledger will reveal that the community knew the servant thought his master unworthy of loyalty.

The first servant presents 10 talents, and gives the credit to his master. As does the 2nd servant. Both receive the same commendation: 'Well done, good and faithful servant.' Jesus does not commend the servant's profitability, He is not commending capitalism, but He is commending open faithfulness to God in a hostile world expressed through the public use of God-given talents.

God doesn't expect the same results from all. Christians have differing levels of ability and gifts. What the master evaluates is not the believer's ability or gifts, but whether the believer has put to full use the talents God has bestowed upon them. People are not equal in ability, but they can be equal in effort.

The master doesn't bestow a villa or foreign holiday on the faithful servants – but entrusts them with even greater responsibilities. The saints of God will inherit an eternal dominion together with Jesus Christ (Dan. 7.27), and greatness based on service for God will continue in the age to come.

The parable however takes a more disturbing turn in verses 24-25: 'Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, 'Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.'

The 3rd servant seems to insult his master – or does he? In the ancient world, reaping the fruit of others' labor was almost respectable. Cicero wrote in 'The Republic' that 'The Gauls think it disgraceful to grow grain by manual labor; and consequently they go forth armed and reap other men's fields.' In the middle-east, Bedouins measure the worth of a man by his skill as a raider – those who sweep down on unsuspecting camps and steal camels, merchandize and slaves. The Babylonian Talmud (Torah) commends David as a man who studied the Torah by morning, and organized the plundering of the unsuspecting as a respectable economic enterprise (Berakot 3b).

The problem seems to be not that the servant insults his master but that he misunderstands him – he critically misjudged his master's true character, and in trying to compliment him actually insults him.

The judgment the master pronounces is that the servant be left with his twisted view of the master that was produced by unfaithfulness with the talents. In effect, the servant looks at his master through blue sunglasses, which makes the master appear blue, so the master leaves his blue sunglasses on him.

David also understood that a person's attitudes and ethical behavior directly influence how they receive God's revelation of Himself. Psalm 18.25-26 summarizes this spiritual reality: 'With the loyal you show yourself loyal; with the blameless you show yourself blameless; with the pure you show yourself pure; and with the crooked you show yourself perverse.' The servant's unfaithfulness with the talent given him produced a twisted vision of his master.

How we live influences how we see God. The more faithful I am in my use of my talents, the more faithful I understand God to be. The more compassion I show to others, the more compassionate I understand God to be. The more encouraging I am to others, the more encouraging I understand God to be. The more loving I am to others, the more loving I understand God to be. The more merciful I am to others, the more merciful I understand God to be. The reverse is also true. So, not faithfully using the talents God has given me not only results in the loss of those talents, but leads to such a distorted understanding of God and his character that I am in danger of losing my eternal life.

Therefore, in the Parable of the Talents, Jesus (the master) challenges us (His servants) to live publicly and boldly as His servants, using His gifts publicly, unafraid of all those today who do say of Jesus that 'We do not want this man to rule over us,' and confident that one day, Jesus will return and bestow an eternal reward on all who are faithful to Him today.

In the Riga Lutheran Academy (Latvia), after 1991 every prospective student who wished to study theology and prepare for the pastoral ministry had to go through a long interview. The most important question they were asked was this: 'When were you baptized?' Why was this the most important question? Those who were baptized before 1991 and the collapse of communism risked their lives and compromise their futures and their

families by being baptized. If they were baptized after the collapse of communism, the seminary had many further questions to ask about their desire to enter the pastoral ministry.

We might make that question more meaningful for ourselves by asking, 'When did I last stand publicly for Jesus Christ in a world that refuses to have Him rule over them?'

It is my prayer that in a largely hostile world which says 'we do not want this man to rule over us,' each of us may faithfully use the talents He has given to each one of us, that our world will know that we are the loyal and faithful disciples of the soon-to-return master, and that when He comes, He will say those wonderful words to each one of us: 'Well done, good and faithful slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master' (Matt. 25.21).