

WHAT CAN WE EXPECT FROM LIFE?

"For unto every one that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundance: but from him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath." Matthew 25:29.

When Ulysses S. Grant was an eight-year-old boy, he wanted very much to buy a pony that a neighbor had for sale. The neighbor, Mr. Ralston, asked \$25 for the pony. Young Grant's father told the boy that the pony was only worth \$20. He said that Ulysses might offer the owner that amount. If it was not accepted, he was to offer \$22.50. If that was not accepted, he could give the full amount. In his autobiography Grant records the transaction this way: "I at once mounted a horse and went for the pony. When I got to Mr. Ralston's house, I said to him: 'Papa says I may offer you \$20 for the colt, but if you won't take that, I am to offer \$22.50, and if you won't take that, to give you \$25.'" "

You may be tempted to think that young Grant was foolish. However, he showed uncommon good sense in the transaction. He wanted something. It had a price. He paid the price and got it. Here is a lesson few of us ever learn. We want plenty of things from life-- happiness, health, friendships, recognition, peace of mind, financial security, etc. They all have their price. The trouble is we want to haggle about it. We have the wherewithal, but we want a bargain. We don't want to meet the conditions.

What can we expect from life? Christ lays down the conditions in the parable of the talents. In it He shows that each of us has been given a certain amount of capacity. What we get for it depends on how we use it.

This story is well known. A man had some servants whom he had bought. Their time, strength and ability belonged to him. Before he left the country, he called his servants together and divided some talents among them. Each servant received something. To some he gave more than to others, and he justified his unequal distribution on the ground that the servants were not equally capable. He gave "to every man according to his several ability." He did not give to either any more than the servant could use. One received five talents, another two and another one. Each was expected to use and to increase his talents, regardless of the number.

Two of the servants were faithful in the use of their talents. Each of them made a hundred per cent increase. He doubled his master's money. This proves that the use of any gift increases it. The third servant was unfaithful. Seemingly he was disappointed with his lot, so he hid his talent in the earth.

After considerable time had elapsed, the master returned and called upon the servants for an accounting. Two of them had doubled their master's money. Both of them received the same word of gratitude and praise from their master for their faithfulness. The third man, who was given just one talent, hid it and then returned it unused. His master was very displeased with him because he did not use what he had given him and then blamed someone else for his failure to do so. He took his talent away from him and gave it to one of the others. "Take therefore the talent from him, and give it unto him which hath ten talents. For unto every one that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundance: but from him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath."

What was Christ telling us in this interesting story?

I. We can expect to get out of life what we put into it.

This parable illustrates the simple fact that men have variable amounts of native equipment. It says that men are rewarded according to the use they make of the capacities they have. The five-talent man was not penalized for his greater abilities. Neither was the two-talent man blamed for having less. Both did the best they could with what had been given to them and were rewarded for their faithfulness.

The reason we do not get more out of life is because we do not put more into it. Most of us have more talents than we use. But only when we invest to a maximum of our capacity do we get a maximum of return. It is not how many talents we have but what we do with what we have that makes the difference. This is demonstrated in the Dictionary of American Biography. A study of the lives of one thousand eminent men and women listed therein showed that only forty-eight were precocious in their youth. Most success comes as a result of intelligent, hard work. We can expect happiness and success only as we live creative and useful lives.

An immigrant youth from Hungary began life in this country working in a pencil factory for seven dollars a week at the age of twenty-two. He liked music and later switched to a pianist's job at a Second Avenue cafe. His salary was fifteen dollars a week, plus all the goulash he could eat. It was a good safe job for those days. But this boy wanted more than goulash. During the years that followed, Sigmund Romberg gave all he had to the development of his talent. He wrote seventy-eight operettas and two thousand songs. When he died, he was one of the world's most beloved composers.

We get out of life what we put into it. This is as true today as in the time when Christ spoke this parable. It is a law of life. It operates in spite of current social, economic and religious philosophies that exalt the mass and belittle individual achievement. We must get away from the idea that there is a social or religious stigma to men being rewarded for faithful effort in proportion to their abilities. Any philosophy that does not recognize unequal talents and rewards is unsound. Christ is interested in every man getting a maximum return for maximum effort.

Take a look at the Young Presidents' Organization. It is composed of presidents of industrial corporations doing an annual business of more than one million dollars and employing over one hundred people or service corporations doing an annual business of two million dollars and employing over fifty people. The catch is that they must have been elected president on or before age thirty-nine. There are four hundred fifty such young men in this category in the United States. Only twenty-five per cent inherited their jobs. The rest worked their way to the top. Nearly all of them struggled for an education and spent time off in the armed services. The point is that life challenges men to give of their best knowing that they get out of life what they put into it. It is the incentive of reward that brings out the best we have.

II. We can expect to lose what we do not use.

The man who had been given one talent hid it in the ground for safe-keeping. That was a common way of keeping money in those days. He did this, he said afterward, for two reasons.

1. He knew his master to be a hard man.

That is, he blamed his failure on someone else. He brought back only that which has been given to him. Instead of coming in humility and self-abasement, confessing his sinful negligence, he came with false excuses, trying to shift the blame from himself upon his master. The fact that he blamed someone else for his own failure shows that he was unworthy of the trust committed to him.

2. He was afraid.

The explanation which he gave for his conduct was that he was afraid. Evidently he was afraid he might wound his own pride. He reminds us of various people. If he could not be captain of the team, he would not play at all. If he could not play first violin, it would not be worth his while to join the band. If he could not sing as well or better than anybody in the choir, he would simply sit in sour silence. How people rob themselves! How they torture themselves by fearing to wound their own pride!

Moreover, the one-talent man was afraid of work. He was lazy. His master called

him slothful. And how much of our failure is due to sheer laziness! There are many tasks that need to be done, and we know that we can and ought to do them, but it is just too much trouble. We simply cannot be bothered. It just isn't convenient.

Furthermore, he was afraid of his master. He did not believe that he would give him a square deal. He thought he would require as much of him as he would the others. So he did nothing. Fear kept him from venturing. He seemed pleased to bring the one talent back to his master intact.

It is noteworthy that the master was displeased with him in spite of his excuses and even though he got his money back. The man had not produced. He had not used his talent. He had been too careful. He had refused to take any chances. He showed that he did not have any faith. Then the master took the one talent away from him and gave it to one of the others.

That was not an arbitrary judgment. It was one of the plain, every-day laws of life. Physically, mentally, morally, spiritually and financially, we lose the powers we do not use. All we have to do to have our talents taken away from us is to do nothing. Many a hymn has gone unsung, a book unwritten, a service undone, because men buried their talents. This one-talent man was not a wastrel. He did not squander his trust. He failed because he took a miserly attitude toward life. He was so anxious to keep what he had that he lost it. This is true no matter how many talents we have.

A seventy-three-year-old man died of malnutrition in Union City, New Jersey. His name was Joseph Bowling. He was a retired government employee who lived in a \$1.70 room in a 38th Street hotel. To all appearances he had been poverty stricken. However, when Arthur Stanton, detective lieutenant, searched the room, he found keys which led to safe-deposit boxes which held a total of nearly one half million dollars in cash and securities. Joseph Bowling literally starved himself to death in the midst of plenty. His miserliness cost him his life.

Far too many do the same thing. We starve ourselves in the midst of plenty. We may not hoard money, but we hoard whatever talents we possess. Then we complain because we do not have more. We blame our parents, our fate, our boss, our world for our own limitations. We are afraid to meet life halfway and give the best we have, however small it may be. Disappointed because we can't do big things, we do nothing. We live ingrown, bottled-up lives and wind up unhappy and desolate.

Most of us are forced to accept the fact that we are one-talent persons, but we can be faithful to our trust. Even the one-talent man could have made one more talent. We are not judged by how much we have, but by what we do with what we have. Our Lord will not reward us for our cleverness, brilliance or success, but for our faithfulness. The important question will be, "Have you been faithful?" While we may not be able to do great things in the eyes of men, we can do the greatest possible thing in the eyes of our Lord, namely, do our best for Him. Our opportunities will be taken away from us if we do not use them.

III. We can expect the freedom to use our opportunities as we will.

The three men in the parable did as they wanted to do with what they had. No one told them just what to do. The two-talent and the five-talent men were free to hide their talents if they had wished to do so. The one-talent man was not forced to bury his talent. He did so because he wanted to. The master went away from them and left them alone. They made their own choices. They took advantage of their opportunities according to their own best judgments. But in the end they were held accountable for what they did.

Life is like that. We are on our own. We can live selfishly or nobly; it is up to

us. We have such endowments as God has given us, small or large. We all have a supply of talents. We are free to use them or to neglect them as we will. But we are responsible to God for what we have and what we do with it. Many men of great abilities never use their full powers. Many men of ordinary abilities discover, as they make use of such talents as they have, that these grow bigger, and new and unexpected opportunities appear. We likely have more talents than we think we have. More opportunities are afforded than we suspect. God has made life that way. We hear wails that all the opportunities are gone, that everything has been done, and that a few men control everything. This is the complaint of small minds and fearful hearts. Life is a rich and fertile field for all men of vision, faith and courage. It is not for lack of opportunities or abilities that we can blame life. The real trouble with too many of us is a lack of spirit and determination and willingness to work and sacrifice. The courageous child of God does not bewail his lack of opportunities. Rather, he makes opportunities.

In 1934 the depression was still in force. There seemed to be no opportunities for young men. This was true for new businesses and especially in the record business. Radio had forced all the record companies but two out of business. These were large, old, conservative companies, and they were supposed to have a monopoly on the business. Then a young man by the name of Jack Kapp thought he saw an opportunity. He had no inside track. His father was a house-to-house canvasser. He himself had worked his way through high school. But he had ideas and energy. He studied the limitations of the big companies. With little backing he started the Decca Record Company, which had a phenomenal success. The opportunity was there for anyone to take. Jack Kapp took it.

What can we expect from life? Not handouts, or unearned support, or lucky breaks, or ease or riches. We can expect hardship and discouragement and resistance and inertia. But we can also expect the freedom to prove ourselves before God and man. The opportunities for self-development, for abundant living and for human service were never greater than they are now. In this parable Christ recites God's challenge to men to use their opportunities. Only in so doing do we prove our right to keep them. We need to catch the spirit of the five-talent and the two-talent men. It is the spirit that ventures toward untried horizons. It is the spirit that opens new frontiers and blazes trails to a new and better world. God can use every single talent we have. The talents that He has entrusted to us must be used or they will decay and disappear. Nowhere else is there as great an opportunity for the exercise of your talents as in the church, where there is work for all.