

## Final Exam

### **Matthew 25:14-30**

Have you ever known a really good kid? I mean one of those kids who was never a problem to parents, who never got into trouble, who worked hard in school, etc. etc. etc.? I'm sure you have. In fact your kids and grand-kids may be like that. I was like that! When I was in high school I never smoked, drank alcohol, or did drugs. I was an "A" student and my teachers enjoyed me. I also wasn't what today would be called a nerd or dork. I played varsity basketball and tennis. I was involved in school clubs and had a girl friend named Wally! (Her father had wanted a boy and wasn't going to be denied naming her as one). It reminds of the Johnny Cash song of the dad who named his boy Sue. Anyway, Wally was a beautiful, flaming red head. But I digress. The bottom line is this – I was a good kid in high school and I never gave my parents or teachers anything to be concerned about. Why? Because I loved my parents and respected my teachers, and I didn't want to do anything that would disappoint them. Besides, I liked being a student-athlete with a gorgeous girl friend, and I liked being successful.

I was so good in high school it was enough to make you sick. I graduated and enrolled at the University of California in Berkeley. And then life really got good! I was recruited to join the freshman crew team and was placed at number five oar, called the power stroke. I was excited about becoming a sophomore the next year and rowing for the legendary Ky Ebright, who had also coached Olympic crew teams. The co-op at the edge of campus where I lived had a large T.V. room, pool table, and beer parties every weekend. I signed up for the usual freshman courses and enjoyed classes. And the best part of all, I was on my own! I had a new found freedom. While I loved my parents, now I could do whatever I wanted, stay out or up as late as I wanted, and didn't have to answer to anyone. I enjoyed the crew practices every afternoon, the football games on Saturdays, and yes, the beer parties, and all the rest of what college had to offer.

I did everything, with one exception – I didn't study. You see, I knew I was a good student-athlete, that I had always been successful and that I could get by on my intelligence and talents. Nobody told me that college was academically very different from high school. Come to find out, grades in college aren't based on daily class participation and weekly quizzes. In most of my classes, the grade was based almost wholly on the final exam. What a deal! Enjoy life for a few weeks and then get ready for the final exam. I may have been intelligent but I certainly was lacking in common sense.

Have you ever tried to digest 400 pages of a text book in a couple of days in order to be ready for a final exam? I have. Need I tell you the outcome? When I got to the final exams in my courses, I failed most of them. After the first semester I was placed on academic probation with a D+ average. Being on probation, of course, took me off the crew team. Ky Ebright himself, who rarely interacted with the freshmen, personally told me how disappointed he was in me. My parents, perhaps really for the first time in my life, were also very disappointed in me.

Now here's the worst part. I didn't learn anything from all of this! I continued to tell myself that I could turn my academics around and still enjoy the fun college life. Halfway through the second semester I withdrew from Cal, because I knew I would be academically dismissed at the end of the year.

My Dad came and picked me up. I will never forget that ride home. Dad never told me he was disappointed in me, but he said something that seared its way into my consciousness and has remained there ever since. He quietly observed, "Rich, you have been given some wonderful talents. You can either use them or waste them. You can either share them with others and contribute something of value to our world, or you can bury them and languish in failure. The choice is yours." He paused, and then asked me simply, "When are you going to decide which it will be?" That was all it took. The next year I enrolled in the California Merchant Marine Academy and began to focus on the important things in life. I still had fun, but I learned to keep things in perspective and balance.

We are at the point in the Gospel of Matthew where Jesus is nearing the end of his ministry. He is in Jerusalem for the final week of his life. Chapter 25 comprises three parables that have the same basic theme. The recurring motif is Jesus' question of readiness for the divine final exam that will come for everyone. The first parable of the ten virgins focuses on watchfulness and resources. This second parable of the talents explores attitude. Following it, the third parable of the sheep and goats, which we will deal with next Sunday, examines ongoing lifestyle and its connection with eternal outcomes. In essence, Jesus is telling us to be ready for the divine final exam, but he is also making it clear that readiness for that exam is not something we can cram for, nor is it something that we need to fear. Instead, the awareness of a coming final exam should help us think through who we are and how our lives can reflect a purpose that has eternal significance.

In all three of the parables in Matthew 25, Jesus calls us to a kind of active patience. We need to wait, because the final exam has not yet arrived. But we need to be active in our waiting, since the final exam will require of us things that can only be gained through the living of these days. I think that is worth repeating – the final exam will require of us things that can only be gained through the living of these days.

In this parable Jesus spoke of talents. A talent was first a unit of weight, about seventy-five pounds. Its value then depended upon what was being weighed. Later the talent became a unit of currency. The common coin of Jesus' time was the denarius. It represented an average day's wage. A talent was equal to about 6,000 denarii. That is almost 16½ years of labor! In the parable, the master gave ten talents to the first servant, the equivalent of wages for 164 years. To the second servant he gave 82 years of wages, and to the third servant, 16½ years. So, while the third servant received only one talent, it was still an extraordinary amount of money.

So, is Jesus talking about money here? Yes, to some degree, but not totally. The money is used as an object lesson and the outrageous amounts he cites are extreme hyperbole – an exaggeration to make a point. The fact is that the Bible spends a lot of time talking about money and possessions. Consider this – there are slightly more than 500 biblical references to prayer and slightly less than 500 references to faith, but there are over 2,000 references to money and possessions. Jesus told 38 parables in the gospels and 16, or nearly one-half, deal with how we handle our money and possessions. Jesus said more about this subject than about heaven and hell combined.

One out of every ten verses in the gospels deals with money and possessions. Why? Because Jesus knew that they have the power to consume, entrap, and destroy us. He also knew that how we handle that which has been given to us is the truest indicator of the spiritual condition of our heart. It is also providential that the word "talent" today points to the gifts and graces we have been given. When Jesus talks about possessions he is not talking just about material things, but also about the abilities God has gifted to each of us. What God has blessed us with is to be used not only for our own achievement, but for the well-being of our neighbors, communities, and indeed the world.

There are four clear lessons from Jesus' words in this parable of the talents:

First, *we are all given different gifts*. The fact that the three servants were given differing amounts of talents is not of any consequence. The talent itself is unimportant. How the talent is used is important. We are not equal in our abilities, but we can be equal in our efforts. In our financial giving, the Bible talks about tithing, because it equalizes our efforts.

Second, *the reward of work well done is more work to do*. The first two servants were told to not rest on their achievements, but were given greater opportunities to serve, and thus greater opportunities to share their gifts.

Third, *the one who is punished is the one who will not try*. The third servant didn't do anything with the gift he was given. What God has blessed us with, both in abilities and financially, is to be used for to help others. This servant wanted to keep things as they were, to keep the gift for himself. If we are unwilling to take a risk, then there cannot be any growth or reward.

And fourth, *the one who uses and shares the gifts will gain; the one who doesn't use the gifts will lose them*. When we don't use the gifts God has given to us, we are being self-centered, even arrogant. God created us to take care of each other. We do so using the blessings he has given to each one of us. I've got mine, you get yours is not an acceptable attitude within God's kingdom.

Dr. Tony Campolo, a noted sociologist and theologian, told of his experience one year at a conference where he was making the keynote address. At one point in the conference, the audience was being challenged with a significant goal for their mission project. The chairman turned to Dr. Campolo and asked him if he would pray for God's blessing upon the people as they considered what they might contribute to help achieve their goal. To the chairman's utter surprise, Tony Campolo came to the podium and graciously declined the invitation. Then he turned to the audience and said, "You already have within this room the resources necessary to underwrite this mission project right now. It would be inappropriate to ask for God's blessing, when God has already blessed you with abundances and the means to achieve this goal. The necessary gifts are in your hands. As soon as we take the offering and underwrite this mission project, then we will thank God for freeing us to be the generous, responsible, and accountable stewards that we are called to be as Christian disciples." And he sat down. The offering was taken and counted. The report came to the conference that the mission project challenge was over-subscribed, and then Tony Campolo led a joyous prayer of thanksgiving for God's abundant blessings and the faithful stewardship of God's people.

Later this week we will be mailing out to you our stewardship letter and materials asking you help underwrite our 2012 budget. We already have within our family of faith the resources necessary to enable our church to soar in mission and ministry in the coming year. Two weeks from today is "Consecration of Gifts Sunday." We will have a special time of receiving your estimates of the giving of your tithes, gifts, time, and talents for 2012 – and then we will have a joyous prayer of thanksgiving for God's abundant gifts and for your faithful stewardship in sharing them. Amen? Amen!

- Pastor Richmond B. Stoakes, Carbondale Community United Methodist Church, 13 November 2011