

Using Our Talents

by the Rev. Eric H. Carswell

“His lord said to him, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant; you were faithful over a few things; I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord’” (Matthew 25:21).

In New Testament times, a talent was a huge sum of money. Its origin as a monetary unit comes from the value of a heavy ingot of precious metal. A talent was approximately 75 pounds in weight. It is said to be equivalent to six thousand denarii or that it was equivalent to more than fifteen years’ wages of a laborer. In today’s values it would be equivalent to thousands of dollars. When the man in the parable gave five talents, two talents and one talent to each of three servants, he was entrusting them with a major responsibility. Any of us would certainly feel the weight of this obligation if someone gave into our care a similar sum of money for an unspecified time.

As with most parables, that of the talents gives us few details. We are left to infer what happened in the hours and days that passed immediately after the master gave his servants the talents and then went away on a journey. Do you think it is likely that the first two servants went right out and started using the money they had been given on the first opportunity that showed itself? Isn’t it more likely that they gave careful consideration to the most prudent way to make use of the huge sum of money the master had given each of them?

When the day of reckoning came, the first two servants had doubled the money they had been given, and the master spoke those gracious words of praise and reward: “Well done, good and faithful servant; you were faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord” (Matthew 25:21).

The third servant miserably states that he was so afraid of the responsibility given him that he had buried the talent in the ground for safekeeping until the master returned. It is interesting to note that the master doesn’t refer to this fear in his condemnation of the man’s actions. Instead the servant is called “wicked and lazy.”

The meaning of this parable is not difficult to recognize. The Lord has given a significant capability to each of us. For example, most of us, by the end of our stay in this world, will have had at least forty or fifty years worth of adult life. Each day of this time we will have had an influence on other people, either by what we do and say or by what we don’t do and say. Just as a talent was equivalent to thousands of denarii, we have thousands of opportunities to be an influence for good or for ill on those around us.

What is the most important measures of what we are accomplishing with our daily words and deeds? We know quite well that the Lord doesn’t measure the success of our lives by crude materialistic results. He states so clearly: “Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal; but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven.... For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matthew 6:19-21).

The most important treasures the Lord has to bring to our lives are not just time and energy. Yes, we given time and the physical capability of getting things done and of communicating with others by speech, tone and expression, but we also have been given minds that can learn. The Lord ensures that all people have the capability of learning the essential truths that allow them to see the value of caring for others.

In the New Church it is our privilege to have more than a vague idea of what is true and good. We acknowledge the Old Testament, New Testament, and the Heavenly Doctrine of the New Church as sources of Divine truth revealed by the Lord. Over and over again in the Word, truth is compared to wealth. Knowing the truth gives a person a tremendous capability. The question for each individual is, what am I doing with the knowledge, time and ability that I have?

A knowledge of the truth is not a guarantee of a more useful life. For example, a broad and clear knowledge of many things can be used by a person to be very critical of others. The more a person knows of what is right and wrong, the more he or she can use that knowledge to measure the actions and words of others. When looked at with a harshly critical eye, all of us fall so far short of the ideal that we can easily be condemned by others.

Knowing the truth is important, but not by itself. Knowing the truth is important only to the degree that it leads us to do what is good. The purpose of knowledge or its intended goal, is wisdom and intelligence or good itself (see *Arcana Caelestia* 2967:3,7). Our lives in this world have the capability of showing this wisdom and of bringing good things to others. We also can bring the opposite to others. A person can be destructively negative, quick to take offense and to point out the faults and flaws of others. Often this is done by a person in order to feel better about himself. A man or woman can convey directly and indirectly to others that they are unimportant and that their primary value is to benefit him or her.

We all have had experience with people whose presence tends to leave others feeling better about themselves and their day, and we have had experience with people whose presence tends to bring anger, fear, and sadness.

Why are some people so hard on others? If you asked them, they would have their reasons, just as the servant who hid the single talent in the ground had his reason for doing it. He said he was afraid. We know that there are both good and healthy fears and destructive ones. The evil spirits present with us from hell love to inspire countless destructive fears in our mind. Perhaps you can think of a recent time in which a fear arose in your mind as the result of some event or something a person said to you, and because of that fear you did or said something hurtful to someone else. The hells would certainly like us all to believe that the best defense is a strong offense, and that we should attack those who threaten us and the things we love. The hells firmly believe that it is wise to get others before they get you.

The master did not condemn the servant for being fearful; he called him “wicked and lazy.” Being useful requires us to overcome the fears inspired by the evil spirits associated with us. We don’t have to be driven by the ideas and motivations they inspire. We don’t have to act or speak from them. Whenever the fears that they inspire in us emerge in our words and deeds, we do evil to others. And to the degree that we are *capable* of rising above such destructive fears and yet don’t, we are being wicked, and this has an influence on the nature of our eternal spiritual life.

Picture a husband who is worried that his wife will be disappointed with him. The evil spirits with him can use this fear, harnessing it to thoughts of all the faults and flaws of his wife. They can inspire rationalizations for his own weaknesses and poor choices. Given time, they can build up a tremendous anger within that man, ready to blow up at the slightest indication of displeasure by his wife. Then out of his mouth can come a stream of accusations and put-downs.

That same husband could recognize this pattern and acknowledge that it comes from hell. He could honestly look at himself and at what he is capable of doing. He could say a prayer to the Lord asking that the destructive fears and evil thoughts inspired by the hells can be withdrawn from him. He can ask for the wisdom and strength he needs to be a good husband. If he does this, when his wife expresses or appears to express displeasure, the man can reflect on its meaning, perhaps calmly asking for clarification. Perhaps there is something he needs to attend to and perhaps there isn't. Through shunning the fears and evils of the hells, he can become a more wisely loving husband.

The Lord has given us minds that can think and the spiritual freedom to choose between the influence of heaven and hell on our thoughts and motivations. We have a huge wealth of choices to make using this freedom. A book of the Heavenly Doctrine, *The Divine Providence*, speaks of this possibility:

If therefore you wish to be led by the Divine Providence, use prudence as a servant and steward does who faithfully dispenses the goods of his master. This prudence is the talent which was given to the servants to trade with, of which they must render an account (Luke 19:13-25; Matthew 25:14-31). Prudence itself appears to a person as his own; and it is believed to be his own so long as he keeps shut up within him the deadliest enemy of God and the Divine Providence, the love of self. This dwells in the interiors of every person from birth; if you do not recognize it, for it does not wish to be recognized, it dwells securely, and guards the door lest the person should open it, and it should thus be cast out by the Lord. A person opens this door by shunning evils as sins, as of himself, with the acknowledgment that he does so from the Lord. This is the prudence with which the Divine Providence acts as one (210:2).

May each of us consider how we are using the talents that the Lord has given us. It matters little to the Lord what occupation we have. He does not call all of us to have a big effect on huge numbers of people or to profoundly change the quality of this world. There are many people who have held jobs that others considered lowly or who have worked patiently and lovingly with an apparently small number of people who contact them each day. Some of these people are nevertheless among the greatest in heaven, and their influence for good is huge in the light of heaven. May we dedicate ourselves to learning from the Lord and to using that knowledge in making our daily choices. May the Lord protect us from the fears that would have us destroy rather than build. May each of us some day be able to hear the Lord say, "Well done, good and faithful servant; you were faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord" (Matthew 25:21). Amen.

Readings: Matthew 25:14-30; *Arcana Caelestia* 2967 (portions)