

A Different Understanding of our Talents

Rich Nathan
October 20 & 21, 2018
Making a Difference
Matthew 25:14-30

How many of you have ever participated in a talent show? You sang a song or you danced or you twirled a baton or told jokes. How many of you have ever participated in a talent show? Raise your hands. How many of you have ever won a talent show? How many of you like watching a talent show?

Over the last 15 years, some of the most popular TV shows in America are talent shows, right? America's Got Talent,

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AGT

The Voice,

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The Voice

The X Factor,

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X Factor

American Idol.

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American Idol

Talent shows are a very old form of entertainment on TV. Some of you are old enough to remember a show on TV that was on during the 1980's. It was called "The Gong Show". On The Gong Show, amateurs would perform in front of a panel of three celebrity judges. They were usually C-list or D-list celebrities. The highlight of the show occurred when one of the performers was truly terrible and a judge would leap up while the performance was still going on and hit a gong to prematurely end the performance.

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Gong Show

The tension would build because the camera would cut back and forth between the performer – the singing would sound like you were strangling a cat or the piano playing sounded like they were wearing oven mitts while they played – the camera would cut back and forth between the performer and the judge who was holding the hammer in their hand and it build anticipation. The audience would be laughing and finally they would hit the gong. The winner on The Gong Show would get a check in ridiculous amounts, like “We have a check for you for \$516.32”.

Now, most of us have a broader definition of talents than singing and dancing or playing a musical instrument. Did you ever think about how we got our word “talent” or our word “talented” in the first place? If you check a good dictionary, Jesus’ Parable of the Talents in Matthew 25 is cited as the source for the modern day word.

We’ve been doing a series here at Vineyard Columbus titled “Making a Difference”. We all want – or we all should want – our lives to count for something. In the first message in this series, I read to you a poem called “The Dash” that was written some years ago by Linda Ellis. The Dash is the dash on people’s tombstones. The dash between our date of birth and our date of death. When we think about making a difference, I’m talking about the dash that’s between those years. Linda Ellis put it so well in her poem:

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For it matters not, how much we own, the cars... the house... the cash.
What matters is how we lived and loved and how we spent our dash.

Today, as we continue this series on making a difference, my message is titled “A Different Understanding of our Talents”. Let’s pray.

Slide Matthew 25:14-30

¹⁴ “Again, it will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted his wealth to them. ¹⁵ To one he gave five bags of gold, to another two bags, and to another one bag, each according to his ability. Then he went on his journey. ¹⁶ The man who had received five bags of gold went at once and put his money to work and gained five bags more. ¹⁷ So also, the one with two bags of gold gained two more. ¹⁸ But the man who had received one bag went off, dug a hole in the ground and hid his master’s money.

¹⁹ “After a long time the master of those servants returned and settled accounts with them. ²⁰ The man who had received five bags of gold brought the other five. ‘Master,’ he said, ‘you entrusted me with five bags of gold. See, I have gained five more.’

²¹ “His master replied, ‘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!’

²² “The man with two bags of gold also came. ‘Master,’ he said, ‘you entrusted me with two bags of gold; see, I have gained two more.’

²³ “His master replied, ‘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!’

²⁴ “Then the man who had received one bag of gold came. ‘Master,’ he said, ‘I knew that you are a hard man, harvesting where you have not sown and gathering where you have not scattered seed. ²⁵ So I was afraid and went out and hid your gold in the ground. See, here is what belongs to you.’

²⁶ “His master replied, ‘You wicked, lazy servant! So you knew that I harvest where I have not sown and gather where I have not scattered seed? ²⁷ Well then, you should have put my money on deposit with the bankers, so that when I returned I would have received it back with interest.

²⁸ “ ‘So take the bag of gold from him and give it to the one who has ten bags. ²⁹ For whoever has will be given more, and they will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them. ³⁰ And throw that worthless servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’

I need to immediately explain to you the meaning of this word “talent” that’s used in the parable from which we get our modern word “talent” or “talented” from. In the original context, a talent was in Jesus’ day, first of all, a measure of weight somewhere between 60 and 80 pounds. And then, after that, it became a unit of coinage. Now it’s very difficult to transfer the value of money from one culture to another and one period of history to another. About the best you can say is what we’re talking about by a talent is the sum of money that an average worker in Jesus’ day would have earned in 20 years of labor.

If you figure that the average salary in America today is about \$60,000 a year then a talent in terms of earning power for today would be about \$1.2 million. The New International Version of the Bible says in a note on the bottom of the page, “A talent was worth more than \$1,000” that’s an incredible understatement. A talent is way more than \$1,000. A talent today is about \$1.2 million.

The master here is obviously quite wealthy and incredibly generous. He handed out nearly \$10 million. The parable is telling us about the character of our Lord who is amazingly generous to us. So our English word “talent” which refers to special abilities and special gifts like musical or athletic or speaking or acting abilities, is taken from this parable of Jesus. We got the word “talent” from this story told by Jesus.

I want to draw out for you a tale of two contrasts in the text.

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A tale of two contrasts

This parable is drawing a sharp contrast between the behavior of the first two servants and the behavior of the third servant. The third servant “stood pat”. They buried their talent, whereas the other servants multiplied their talents.

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Standing pat with our talents vs. improving on our talents

This parable tells us that the Lord expects us to improve on our talents while we are alive.

In fact, the Lord holds us accountable for improving on everything that he’s given us. We read this in verse 19:

Slide Matthew 25:19

¹⁹ “After a long time the master of those servants returned and settled accounts with them.

There is an accounting coming. For all of us, there is a Day of Judgment whether our secular society acknowledges that or scoffs at that. There is a Day of Judgment coming for each of us. We’ll have to give an account. There is a final reckoning. One thing that the Lord will hold us each accountable for is improving on everything he has given us – our relationships, our aptitudes, our experiences, our education, our work environment, everything – God always says throughout the Bible, “Improve on the world that I gave you!” And this notion of our calling as human beings to improve on the world goes back to the very first command that God gave to our first parents and through them to us way back at the beginning of the Bible in Genesis 2:15.

Here’s what we read:

Slide Genesis 2:15

¹⁵ The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.

Now this along with a command in Genesis 1 is sometimes called the “Creation Mandate” or the “Cultural Mandate”. If you’re a human being, Genesis 2:15 applies to you. Let me read it again.

Slide Genesis 2:15

¹⁵ The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.

This instruction preceded Adam and Eve’s fall into sin. This suggests that labor or working is not a consequence of sin. We would be expected to work hard even if the fall

had never occurred. In fact, work is a God-like activity. Part of the way that we are image-bearers of God is that we work. In Genesis 2:2, we read:

Slide Genesis 2:2

² By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work.

See that. We work because God works. Because we're created in his image.

Now, he gives us two commands – to work and to take care of the garden. God didn't create a static world. He didn't want his perfect creation to remain the same. Rather, he asked Adam and Eve to make it better. We should find that a bit shocking that God didn't take the safe route and say to Adam and Eve, "I'm making the world perfect. You have one job, don't screw it up!" He could have said something like, "Children, here's a wonderful world for you to enjoy. Have all the fun you want, just don't break anything or you're going to have to pay for it. You've read the sign in the store: 'You break it, you bought it.'"

God didn't hang a sign in the garden saying that. God created this beautiful Garden of Eden in the midst of a beautiful earth. He placed Adam and Eve there and he tells them to change things. You ask, how can someone improve on an already perfect glorious world? By developing the world in a uniquely human fashion! Plant the roses over there. Learn what grows best, what you enjoy eating. Plant those crops in a different place. God wanted Adam and Eve to participate in an ongoing work of developing creation. Take the raw materials of this perfect world and arrange them, use them for the highest possible benefit. Theologians call this "the cultural mandate". Cultures advance as people learn how to cultivate the resources of God. They learn how to grow more corn with less energy. They learn how to construct instruments and then they learn how to play those instruments – like a piano or a violin. They learn how to get more milk from a cow or write more beautiful words for the pages of a novel.

The goal of human history is not for us to return to the Garden of Eden. It's to improve on the garden, to partner together with God in bringing about the New Jerusalem. Now, I don't know what you expect to find in the New Jerusalem that's talked about the book of Revelation, but I expect every good thing humans have ever done. Every amazing painting, every incredible song, every wonderful book, every loving act, every athletic achievement, every amazing dish that my wife made, every heroic deed, every kindness, everything that is good and noble and right and praiseworthy, all the best of human culture cleansed of sin and purified of selfish motive, I believe it's all going to be there. God says, "Improve on your talents."

You know what, life is always in motion. You can only move in one or two directions in life. You're either always improving or you are losing ground. You can't stand pat.

Here's what we read:

Slide Matthew 25:28-29

²⁸ “ ‘So take the bag of gold from him and give it to the one who has ten bags. ²⁹ For whoever has will be given more, and they will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them.

You see this principle of loss everywhere when someone doesn't improve or invest, right? You lose. Some of you won't invest in your marriages or in your past marriage. You refused to invest or your spouse refused to invest, you just go through the motions. You don't invest the talent of your marriage by seeking counseling where you need it or if you go to counseling you won't invest in the counseling process by being vulnerable, by being honest and looking at yourself. You won't put yourself on the line that much. You won't attend a marriage seminar. You won't make changes. You say, “You know, I just want to stand pat. I don't really want to try to improve on this relationship, I don't want to lose either.” But we know the result of that. The result of not investing in our marriages is that many of us lose our marriage.

Other people won't invest in their spiritual lives. I accepted Jesus into my heart, now I just want to put it in automatic. I really don't want to push myself to read the Bible. That takes effort and energy. I don't want to push myself to take time with God each day. I don't want to push myself to join a group or to serve. What we find is that little bit of connection that we had with God that we were so excited about when we started our relationship with Jesus – when we don't invest in our relationship with God, that little bit of spiritual life dies out.

The principle in this parable is that you use it or lose it. There's a contrast drawn between standing pat with our talents vs. improving our talents. And there's a contrast drawn between:

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An enormous view of our talents vs. a small view of our talents

People always ask, “What did Jesus specifically mean when he said that the Master entrusted talents to his servants?” Is he just talking about money? Is he referring to our gifts and abilities? Is he referring to spiritual gifts? Is he referring to our opportunities? What exactly do the talents symbolize?

I believe that Jesus is being deliberately vague because he is referring to the whole of our lives that have been given so generously to us by God. I believe that your talents, at least in reference to this text, can refer to your opportunities for service, your talents could include your time. You could apply this parable to your money; you could apply it

to your gifts and abilities; you could apply it to your intellect; to your capacity for empathy; to your gentle nature; to your strength; to your health. A talent is anything that you have been given that you could multiply for the good of others and the glory of God. Anything. Your artistic ability, your ability to repair cars, your free time – all that makes up you and the box you are in – that is your talent.

But your talents also include the negative experiences of your life that you've been healed of. What God has saved you out of – promiscuity, drug use, a divorce, depression, eating disorders, unemployment – whatever God has done in your life to deliver you, to redeem you, to teach you and grow you, and to mold you through negative experiences, that is what he wants you to invest in other people's lives. Those learning, growing, and saving experiences are some of the greatest talents you have.

The reason I underline the negative stuff you have been saved out of as one of your talents is because this is so often neglected. God wants a return on everything, literally everything he has done in your life and my life. Someone else can benefit from the school of hard knocks that we've been too. There are people who can receive comfort from the comfort the Lord gave you in your hour of need. Whatever you have learned from, whatever you have grown from – misunderstanding, unfair treatment, an abusive childhood or marriage, the death of a loved one, an illness – if you say to the Lord: Lord, let me learn from this. Let me grow from this. Don't let this pain go wasted in my life. That friend, can become a talent to invest in other people. Have you considered using some of the negative experiences in your life to help someone else? Do you think you could find a way to make a difference in another person's life as a result of your life experience?

Do you know, brothers and sisters, that some of the most effective ministries that we have here at Vineyard were started or led by a person who either experienced great failure in a certain area or great suffering or challenge? We have a ministry here to men who are struggling with a whole range of sexual addictions. We call it 180. Every Monday evening, here at Vineyard Columbus at the Cooper Road campus, dozens of men of varying ages find freedom from various kinds of sexual addictions – addictions of pornography, promiscuity, prostitution, affairs and all of that. The ministry was started by a man in our church named John Doyel.

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John Doyel photo

John was a pastor here in our city. He had a moral failure and had to give up his pastorate. He came over to Vineyard with his wife, not as leaders but as people who were broken by sin. John found freedom from sexual addiction in one of our recovery groups, and then after some years he started this group for men. He used his talent – being healed of a past addiction. His online ministry and through multiplying materials

for other churches, John is ministering to hundreds of men, helping them to get free from sexual addiction.

God wants improvement on everything in our lives, including the negative things that we've been healed from. Including the places that we've messed up in. Can even this bad thing, this hurtful thing be turned around and used for people's good and God's glory?

Our Value Life ministry where we come alongside of women who are facing unintended pregnancies, in the last 15 years we've come alongside more than 5,000 women in our community. The Value Life ministry is led by a woman on our staff named Diane Bauman.

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Pic of Diane

Diane herself had an abortion when she was a teenager. She believed she had no alternative. After Diane was healed here at Vineyard of that long suppressed memory of her abortion, she used that, she improved on that by ministering to thousands of girls and women who believe the lie they have no alternative except to abort their baby.

Brothers and sisters, I could point to so many of our addiction recovery groups, our grief support groups – the point is our talents include even the negative things from which we have been healed in our lives. What could you do because of what you've been through, because of your unique experiences use those things for people's good in God's glory? Is there anything in your life that you've regarded as a negative that can be turned into a positive? Your marriage has been healed? Why not contact our Marriage and Family Life ministry and become a marriage coach to someone else? You've been healed of an addiction. Why not help someone else find freedom by contacting our Support for Life ministry and seeing how you could get involved?

Clearly, this parable is focused on the third servant, the servant with one talent. Jesus is warning his listeners to not be like that servant. Without giving the matter much thought, the third did what was the conventional thing to do. He looked at his master and the way he thought the master operated and he didn't see himself being able to do more than just preserve what he had been given.

Why did this servant bury his talent in the ground? Let me suggest two excuses why the servant did that and why we might do that.

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A tale of two excuses

Perhaps the servant was resentful that he or she got only one talent, and they looked around and compared what they got to the other servants and they said:

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My situation is too limited

We see that all the time, don't we? They have the freedom to engage in service, but I've got three kids. I've got nothing or almost nothing that I can make available to help anyone else or to bring glory to God. I'm a single mom. I've got my hands full just taking care of the kids. That's it. I've got one talent. I'm elderly. I only feel good a few hours a day. I'm in college. I'm working my first job. I don't have time to make a difference in anyone else's life. I have only one talent.

Remember who Jesus is talking to. He's probably talking to people who the ancient world would have regarded as one talent or no talent people. The early church was made up of people who were the disenfranchised. They were the poor. They were slaves. They were women. They were from insignificant backwater places in the Roman Empire. You know, throughout the church's history, the church has talked so much about the sin of pride. That's mainly a view from above, from people who have many talents, but there's a sin from below. The sin of resentment that I only have one talent. The sin of self-hatred, that I am not enough. The sin of ingratitude, that God hasn't given me enough.

Let me tell you a story about a woman named Jane Merchant. Jane was born in 1919, the last of four children in a farm family. When she started to walk as a toddler she broke her leg. When that leg healed, she broke her other leg. The doctor diagnosed her with "brittle bones" disease. It's a rare condition. It's now known as osteogenesis imperfect. Her parents decided she was too frail to go to school so she was taught at home. She read everything her parents had – the Bible, Shakespeare, Charles Dickens, every book they had. They would go to the library and pick out books for her and bring them back.

When Jane was 12, both her legs and one arm were broken just moving her from her bed to a wheelchair. She was forced to lie flat on her back until she was 15, and they got an adjustable hospital bed so she could be raised without breaking her bones.

Her family lost the farm during the Great Depression. They moved to a small house with no electricity. When she was 21, Jane Merchant went deaf, a side effect of the disease. She sunk into a depression. If anyone could ever say "My situation is too limiting", it would be Jane Merchant. Then she read a book by a famous preacher who said:

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Circumstances do not determine the life of a person as much as their response to circumstance.

This preacher used the example of blind and deaf Helen Keller and the deaf composer Beethoven. He went on to say:

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We all have cellars in our houses, but we don't have live in them.

Jane decided to move out of the cellar. She discovered that she had a talent for writing. She started to write poems. Over the next 25 years, Jane Merchant had more than 2,000 of her poems published. She won all kinds of awards and she did it all while lying in a bed.

Hey, my situation is too limiting. We are creatures made by God, we all have to live within some box that life has designed for us to live in. The box of our gifts, our abilities, our disabilities, our opportunities, other people's sins. We don't get to choose the size of box we're in. In the parable that we're reading, it's the master who determined how to allocate the talents, whether five talents or two talents or one talent. Some of us are in really big boxes, others of us are in very, very small boxes.

Contrary to what the prosperity teachers teach, we don't have infinite possibilities for our lives or infinite potential. Only God has that! I'm 5' 8" and that's when I'm wearing my shoes! At my age, I have a 12" vertical leap. I've had to come to grips with the fact that I will never play pro basketball and I will never play center field for the Yankees. I've been put in a certain size box by God. And so have you.

Our job in life is not to grieve that we weren't put in some other size box or to envy the circumstances and opportunities that someone else has. Our job in life is to fully explore and to fill out the box we're in and to not live with self-imposed limits, to not live in the cellar of our homes. There is so much more of the box that you're in that you haven't explored. Most people live in a corner of the box that God has put them in. Jane Merchant could have done that. She could have crawled up in that bed and shriveled up and died. She said, "No, I'm going to explore the whole box – I have this incredible talent for writing poetry.

How much of the box that you've been put in, friend, have you explored? A small part? Why does that third servant bury their talent in the ground? They may have thought my situation is too limiting, they may have thought:

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My gifts are too common

There's a book written about 30 or so years ago that some of you may have heard of. It's called *The 100th Monkey*. The book reports a phenomenon that scientists observed during their 30 year study of Japanese monkeys. In 1952, on the island of Koshima, scientists began providing monkeys with sweet potatoes that they dropped in the sand. The monkeys liked the sweet potatoes, but they found the sand that was stuck to the sweet potatoes unpleasant. They'd spit it out.

One young female monkey solved the problem. She began washing her sweet potato in a nearby stream. The male monkeys were too stupid, they just kept eating sand. Between 1952 and 1958, all the young monkeys and some adult monkeys watched this young female wash her sweet potato and they began to imitate her. Then, there was a tipping point and every monkey on the island began washing their potatoes in water. Then, somehow, miraculously this awareness jumped from that island to other islands. And monkeys from other islands began washing their potatoes.

The point of the book is that when we reach some kind of critical mass then almost everyone gets changed. The book was written in the hope that if a critical number of people said no to nuclear war that the nations of the earth would determine to get rid of nuclear weapons. Those kind of changes have happened in history. Enough people said no to cannibalism. Cannibalism is no longer practiced. Enough people said no to killing girl babies as we've done throughout human history, and that is generally no longer practiced. The mentally ill are no longer kept in chains.

The point is that our gifts don't have to be unique in order to make a difference. We could add the weight of one more person, one more voice, one more helping hand. Everyone's talents – even those that are common – are needed in God's kingdom.

You know, every weekend at all our campuses, in order to have services run – this is totally apart from children's ministry – just to have services run for everyone we need nearly 500 volunteers. We have some ministries that are specialized and you need special talent.

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- Worship ministry
- Media arts
- Medic

Media arts is running sound and the lights. Being a medic is volunteering to help if we have a medical emergency.

There are a half a dozen other ministries that we need hundreds of you to volunteer to help us with.

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- Hospitality
- Café
- Bookstore
- Security
- Parking lot volunteers
- Prayer Ministry Teams

You can be any age to hand out bulletins but it makes a difference for people to have someone smile and give them a bulletin. It makes a difference to a guest who comes to our church and has people direct them into a parking space or help them with an umbrella in the rain or just smile and wave on their way in.

Even if you are an incredibly busy person what if you took a half hour to be on the hospitality team? Or you learned to help us with the slides or sound board? Or you volunteered in the café and make coffee? And you make Vineyard Columbus a more welcoming place. Have you considered working at our weekend services?

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Text to Serve slide

Friends, the Lord has called each of us – one talent, two talent, five talent persons – to make a difference in this world by using our talents for people's good and for God's glory! Let's pray.

A Different Understanding of our Talents

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Making a Difference
Matthew 25:14-30
#MakingADifferenceVC

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B. An enormous view of our talents v. a small view of our talents

II. A Tale of two excuses

A. My situation is too limited

B. My gifts are too common