

MINISTRY: YOUR LIFE CALL

Five Guiding Values

Matthew 25:14-30

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I heard about a football game that was played on Noah's Ark between the big animals and the small animals. In the first half, the lions, tigers and bears had their way with the rabbits, squirrels, beavers and the like. Only a porcupine and a skunk slowed the big animals down. In the second half, a big tiger was immediately tackled for a safety. An elephant was nailed for a loss. Repeated runs by a grizzly bear were stuffed. Noah looked closely to see what was happening and found a centipede had made every tackle. Noah asked for a timeout and went up to the centipede. "Where were you the first half," he asked. The Centipede answered, "I was in the locker room tying my shoes."

Unless you have stock in Velcro, you might think there is no point to that joke. Despite the absurdity, it illustrates one valuable thing. Occasionally, the key player in a struggle never gets on the field. Maybe she is stuck in a locker room lacing her shoes, or

maybe he is standing on the sidelines not knowing when to go in. Maybe the person is too afraid to get involved. Whatever the case, some key players never get on the field, and Jesus told a story about that.

He told of a wealthy landowner that went away on a long journey. Three of his servants were given charge of his money based on the owner's assessment of their ability. One was given charge of a quarter of a million dollars. A second was in charge of a hundred grand. The third oversaw 50 thousand dollars. That is about the worth of one talent. When the owner returned, he found that the first and second servants worked hard and doubled the wealth they managed. The third buried the money and turned his attention elsewhere. He never got on the field. He claimed his inactivity was due to his fear, that he was afraid he wouldn't please the owner. The owner did not flinch. He called the servant "wicked and lazy." The servant was wicked because he ignored his relationship to the owner and betrayed his trust. He was lazy because he gave no energy to his calling. As a result, the servant not only lost his position, he experienced utter isolation and rejection. That is a natural result of rejecting God.

When Jesus told this story, he was teaching about his return. The disciples had asked him about the end of the world. In answer, he told them about false signals and true signals of his coming. He said that his return would be unexpected, that it would catch many by surprise; but for others, who were watching and waiting, his return would seem delayed. He told the story of ten virgins awaiting the arrival of a bridegroom. Five planned for a delay and five did not. When the delay occurred only five of the ten young women were then prepared and could accompany the bridegroom to the wedding. He then told the story that we read today. He told about the owner entrusting the talents to his servants and then returning to hold them accountable. Finally, he told a story about a king separating his subjects like sheep from goats at the end of the age. All would be

held accountable for their deeds. In each story Jesus warned his followers to resist the deception of circumstance and be vigilant and diligent.

We are to be vigilant and diligent because we are those servants with the talents and we will be held accountable. In the parable of the talents, Jesus taught, first, that we all have a **position** with God. We are stewards. We are administrators with a responsibility. Jesus taught that we are more than servants. In the 15th chapter of the gospel of John, Jesus said that a servant simply obeys orders. He doesn't know his master's business, but a friend knows it all. Jesus said we believers are friends. He reveals the whole business to us. We are friends that have a key position. You are a key player in the struggle of redemption. You are critical to the future of many. Second, Jesus taught that we have *been given* **responsibility**. What is that responsibility? God doesn't merely give us a portion of his money. He *gives* us relationships with people, *divinely established relationships*. We have no relationship by chance. Every relationship we have is divinely ordained. The people within our sphere of influence are the talents we have been given. Some of us have been given a lot. Some of us have been given few. But these people are the money in the parable. They are our charge. (Often the talent or money in this parable has been identified with our abilities, but that simply is not true. The talent in the parable is the responsibility that we care for according to our ability.) Our responsibility is people. Third, Jesus taught that we are to do God's bidding as it relates to our **abilities and spiritual gifts**. We are to use our abilities and gifts so that people might experience the love of God. Indeed, Jesus said a few verses later in Matthew that we would be held accountable for how we treated the least person in our sphere of influence. He said that how we treat the least person is how we treat Jesus.

You see all people in our sphere of contact are the charge that God has given us. Ignore them and you ignore God.

Because God is your father and Lord, you are to be about his business. Because God gives life to people and guides you into relationship with them, they are your charge. Because God gives you abilities, you are equipped to make a difference. How, then, are you investing in people? How are they grasping God's love because of you?

Most people won't taste God's love until one of Christ's ambassadors befriends them. Most often it takes the love of friendship, even sacrificial love, to reveal God's love. Jesus said that the mark of his disciples would be their sacrificial love. Jesus called his followers to lay down their lives for their friends, even as he did. He said, "If you want to come after me, deny yourself, take up your cross and follow." The needs of people were his agenda and their blessing was his food. That was true because of his love. Through his friendship, people were reconciled to God. In our friendship, that happens as well. God builds his kingdom through friendships.

I look back at my life and I don't see Sunday School teachers and youth workers. Instead, I remember as a child adult friends who taught my Sunday School class. I remember as a youth adult friends who worked with me. I remember Bill Ellsworth. He was a retired pastor from another denomination who worked in a butcher shop to support his wife and himself. I can't remember anything profound he said. He just showed up time after time and helped with projects we youth were doing. I remember spending a Friday night at his house watching movies with his wife and him. He wasn't task oriented like leading a Bible study or running a program. He was person oriented. He

cared about me. He was my spiritual friend that revealed God's love in his love. If I must choose, I'll take a Bill Ellsworth over a mission trip or a camp anytime because spiritual friendships make such a difference.

Do you hear what I am saying? The kingdom of God is built through friendships. People are not built through programs. They are changed by friendships within a program. The worth of any program is whether it helps spiritual friendships form and whether it helps Christian people use their gifts.

No child needs a Sunday School teacher. They all need an adult friend who really cares about them personally and who knows God's love and will teach them the truth of the gospel. That is the only way Sunday School is effective. We don't need people who fill the role of Sunday School teacher. We need people who care about kids, are committed to kids and are equipped through the Sunday School program to make a difference in kid's lives. Youth need exactly the same thing. They don't need people who fill a role in a program. They need individuals who befriend them and who use their abilities to build spiritually secure and discerning teenagers. As a parent, I will pick a person over a program for my children any day. If one church offers me a program, and another offers me a person, there is no question about my choice. Programs are nice, but spiritual friends change lives. You have someone passionately committed to the spiritual welfare of my kid, and I'll take that over any program on earth.

When Jesus told the parable of the servants or talents, he really wasn't talking about money. He was talking about people and the relationships that God gives us. We

really are ministers to people. That is our life calling. We make an eternal impact, if we get on the field.

One woman in a nursing home felt God wanted her to write someone, anyone who was in prison. She contacted a prison ministry and began writing one inmate. She became his spiritual friend. Within a short time she was writing fifty inmates a month. She not only was making an impact with her friendship, but she was fulfilling her life call. She said, "Life began for me at 98!"

Please don't wait that long to get on the field. By virtue of your position with God, you have a life calling. What you do with your abilities will make all the difference for someone, and there is much to suggest that it will make all the difference for many. Don't be unbelieving and lazy. Commit your remaining days on this earth to fulfill your life call. Will you do that? Will you pray with me now? Just repeat these words.

Lord Jesus, I have heard your call. I accept your friendship. Your Father is my Father. Your business is my business. Your people are my people. Forgive my unbelief. I show up now to receive my assignment. I will invest my energy and my life in the people you show me. I will work according to the abilities you have given me. I will live as a committed and spiritual friend to whomever you direct. I will answer your call. Thank you for your trust. Thank you that my life counts big in your plans. Thank you for the privilege to make a difference. Amen.