

What would you do with \$1,000 if it were given to you? That was the challenge given to 5 different people by Today Tonight on channel 7 a few years ago. They were each given \$1,000 and asked to make the most of it over a set time. The gambler set off to the Casino, a single mum invested in Telstra shares, a retired couple invested in more risky stocks, a property tycoon bought an option to buy a unit, and a group of primary school children used the money to fund raffles and streets stalls and their own small business. After a few weeks they were all asked to account for what they had done with the thousand dollars. Some made more, some made less. Can you imagine one of them handing the money back at the end of the period saying “I was afraid so I hid it in my back yard!” A few weeks ago some experts were telling us to do just that - put it under the mattress, it might be the safest place of all! It might be safe, but it wouldn’t be doing anything useful for the world either.

Jesus told a story about a man who entrusted his servants with his property while he went away. They were each given different amounts according to their ability. The amounts are called “talents”, and a talent was a weight of something, in this case money. They each received some weighty amount. One received one talent, a weighty amount, another twice as much, and another five times as much as the first man. Two wasted no time making use of the money and both of them doubled it. When the master returned he was thrilled and commended them. “Wonderful” “Well done”! “You are a good and faithful servant” he said to both and he put them in charge of even more and invited them to party with him.

The third servant simply gave the master back what he had been first given, every single coin, excusing himself from doing anything with the money because he had been afraid of losing it and blaming the master for expecting too much. He had buried it in the ground for safety. Every last cent was accounted for, no less, but no more either. The master got stuck into him. “You’re lazy and good for nothing!” he scolded and accused him of not at least putting the money in the bank to earn interest for him. He took away what the third servant had been given and gave it to the one who now had 10 talents, and he threw the “the worthless servant” out into the dark.

God has given each of us gifts. We may think they are not much, but to God they are weighty gifts, gifts of substance. The greatest gift is his Son Jesus Christ and the Good News that we are forgiven and saved through what Jesus has done for us on the cross. Even faith to believe with is a gift from God. But our “talents” - the things entrusted to us have not been dished out the same. God gives different abilities and talents to different people in his Kingdom. The Holy Spirit gives different spiritual gifts to different Christians to build up the church and make Jesus known to the world. God does not expect the same from all of us because we are all different, but he does expect the same responsibility and the same faithfulness. One lady makes casseroles for others, some open their homes and share the gift of hospitality with others, some serve in community care, some work with children, some use up front speaking gifts, preaching and teaching God’s word, some speak better one to one with neighbours and friends, some use musical and singing gifts to inspire our worship. Some have been entrusted with wealth and use it to serve God and bless lives. Some have gifts with their hands and can repair things for others. Some understand computers. There is no point comparing really in the church because we are all different in what we have to use for God. But all of us are called to invest in what God has entrusted to us in the business of his kingdom. The same Gospel is given to us all but we have varying measures of talents and gifts to use in sharing what life in Gods kingdom is all about.

Jesus’ story shows that God commends responsible risk-taking, stepping out to use what he has entrusted to us and he promises to bless us as we do that. And his story reminds us that the reward for using our gifts for God’s Kingdom is not early retirement and definitely not earning our way to heaven, but more responsibility. Faithful servants are entrusted with more to look after. I find that in my own ministry, the more faithful I am the more God seems to send people and opportunities my way to use his gifts.

The man punished was the man who did nothing, who would not even try. “I was afraid” he said as he buried the masters money. Fear about the master paralysed him from being creative and taking risks in using the money given to him. When we are afraid we freeze, hold back, become inhibited and cautious and withdraw. We don’t venture very far. We are often so worried about own salvation we have little energy to think of others. We are happy if the church is there when we want it but does not ask too much of us. Jesus story condemns those who want to keep things as they are - safe, without commitment or risk.

Having sound teaching is a good thing but if all we do is preserve it and not live it and give it away we are guilty of burying what God has entrusted to us.

*“For God’s sake use it or lose it!”* Jesus’ parable says to us. The unfaithful servant had his money taken away. Jesus saves, but not like us in banks, Jesus saved people by giving himself to people and showing extravagant mercy and kindness. Churches that refuse to use the Gospel don’t stay wherever they are, they usually die. They lose what they once had. There is a warning there for every church.

When I read this parable I often have a problem with the master’s anger. At least he got his money back from the third servant. Didn’t he go a bit over the top? Perhaps it’s because the third servant reminds me of myself - I play safe with God’s gifts and gospel. I often see God as a hard master expecting too much of me. I see God as stingy and unfair, and a lot of my inner energy goes into thinking about my self - avoiding what I fear, so I sometimes have little energy for others. I don’t want to lose my salvation but don’t want to take risks with my life either. If we focus on the anger of the master and the anger of God we have missed something important in the story, and that is the generosity of the master and of God. What a risk the master took leaving his servants with everything he owned! What trust! And that’s our God! He trusts us to use all our gifts and talents as a witness to his greatest gift, the gift of Christ himself.

Jesus told this story not long before he went to the cross. There he gave us everything he had. He invested his life in us. He made a “short term sacrifice for a long term gain” - our gain. Now he calls us to do the same. In that light I can begin to understand God’s anger when I refuse to take a few risks for him. When I play it safe for myself. What I should be thinking is not “master how could you do this to the poor servant who only got 1 talent?” but “God how could I do so little with my gifts in response to your sacrifice for me.”

God has given you life, health abilities money, forgiveness, faith, a place in his Kingdom. Now use them! Not in fear but freely making short term sacrifices for the long term gain of God’s kingdom like he did. Can you imagine how it would look standing before God saying “I looked after my self, I kept your Gospel to myself too” as if God should be happy with that!” Keeping the faith doesn’t mean keeping it to ourselves. Faithfulness not staying as you are and keeping things as are. Faithfulness is doing everything in your God given power with all we are and have to further God’s business of proclaiming Jesus Christ as the saviour of the world.

Our congregation consists of ordinary people, young and old, men women and children. But something extraordinary has been entrusted to us. How different would our church life be if we knew we had one year left together before Jesus returned? What risks would we take, what words of love would we speak, what would be our own life priorities and as a congregation? And in the light of this parable how would God evaluate our last year together at our AGM next week? God does not ask “how many times did you sit in the pew last year?” but “what happened when you left the pew and went back into the world that week?” Not “was the budget met?” but “did each of you give generously to my mission in the world from whatever amount I had entrusted to you? Not “were you on a committee?” but “did you use your gifts consciously and intentionally as a witness to me this year?” Not “how many new members have you gained” but were each of you taking opportunities to share Christ’s love and forgiveness and good news with someone this year? “Did you use your gifts to advance my kingdom or yours this year?” Probably most of us would say “yes and no” - we did to an extent but not what we could have.

I can picture a fourth servant in Jesus parable - one who wheels and deals and takes chances but loses the lot. What would the master do? What would God do with a Christian who shares his faith and uses his gifts and invests his life in others without fear yet has little to show? If I know the mind of God from this story he would say “well done, you had a go! You know my heart. A heart that is generous, trusting, gracious, a heart without fear but full of love a heart that was willing to risk everything for me”.

*“For God’s sake use it or lose it!”*

May this parable help us think carefully about the time we have left so when Jesus appears he might say “wonderful, well done, you are good and faithful servants, come and share my happiness”.