

Discovering Our Talents

SERVICE & SPIRITUALITY

There is a quiet question that settles over every servant, sometimes in a moment of stillness after liturgy, sometimes in the middle of a sleepless night: what exactly has the Lord given me, and what does He want me to do with it? It is one of the most intimate questions a disciple can ask. It is also one of the most unsettling, because it lays bare how little we often know ourselves, and how much we have quietly been comparing ourselves to others. The Gospel does not treat this question as optional. Our Lord tells us, in the parable of the talents, that every servant has been handed something — not the same amount, and not the same kind, but something real and something meant to be invested. To discover our talents is not the work of self-flattery; it is the work of honest gratitude. The Giver has already given. Our labor is simply to recognize what He has placed in our hands, to accept it without comparing it to anyone else's, and to give it back to Him multiplied. In this lesson we will sit with that quiet question together, and we will let Scripture and the Fathers help us see, perhaps for the first time, what the Lord has already been entrusting to us all along.

The Parable That Still Finds Us

Our Lord told many parables, but few of them unsettle a servant the way the parable of the talents does. It does not feel like a story about somebody else. Every time we hear it, there is a faint pressure in the chest, because we know, in some quiet way, that the story is about us.

A master goes on a long journey. Before he leaves, he does something striking: he places his own wealth into the hands of his servants. Not a bonus, not a loan — his wealth, his own property, to be carried while he is away. To one he gives five talents, to another two, to another one, "to each according to his own ability" (Matthew 25:15). The detail is worth lingering over. The master does not distribute the money randomly. He knows each servant. He has measured each one. He gives to each exactly what that servant can carry, no more and no less. And then He goes away.

Two of the servants get to work. The third does something that, at the time, probably felt very reasonable: he digs a hole and buries the talent in the ground. He does not spend it. He does not lose it. He simply keeps it safe, untouched, so that when the master returns the silver will be exactly where he left it. And we know, without even reading to the end, that this will not go well for him:

"After a long time the lord of those servants came and settled accounts with them. So he who had received five talents came and brought five other talents, saying, 'Lord, you delivered to me five talents; look, I have gained five more talents besides them.' 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 25:19–21, NKJV)

The tenderness of that last line is often missed. "Enter into the joy of your lord." The reward is not a bigger purse or a grander title; the reward is the joy of the Master Himself. To discover our talents and to invest them is, finally, not a transaction. It is a homecoming. It is the return to a joy that has been waiting for us all along.

St. John Chrysostom, preaching on this very passage to a congregation of ordinary Constantinopolitan laymen — many of whom had decided, quietly, that the parable was about somebody more talented than they were — pressed the point home with his usual bluntness:

“The talents here are each person's ability, whether by way of protection, or by way of money, or by way of teaching, or by way of anything of the kind. Let no one say, 'I have but one talent, and can do nothing.' For you can do even with this single talent something worthy of acceptance.” — St. John Chrysostom, Homily 78 on Matthew

No one is exempt from the parable. No one has been handed nothing. The question is never whether the Master has entrusted us with something; the question is only whether we have had the courage, yet, to notice what it is.

The First Step: Honest Gratitude

Before we can invest anything, we must see it. And before we can see what we have been given, we must be willing to stop comparing it to what others have been given. This is harder than it sounds. Comparison is perhaps the single greatest thief of the servant's gifts. It convinces a beautifully patient teacher that she is only useful if she can also sing. It convinces a warm-hearted visitor of the sick that he is worthless because he is not also a preacher. It convinces a natural organizer, whose quiet spreadsheets keep the whole ministry running, that his gift does not count because no one applauds it from the pulpit.

St. Paul will not permit this in the body of Christ. He writes to a Corinthian church already tearing itself apart over whose gift was most impressive:

“There are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are differences of ministries, but the same Lord. And there are diversities of activities, but it is the same God who works all in all. But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to each one for the profit of all.” (1 Corinthians 12:4–7, NKJV)

Three times in two verses, the Apostle refuses to let the Corinthians rank one another. The diversity of gifts is not a problem to be solved; it is the Holy Spirit's own design. And the purpose clause at the end is worth memorizing — to each one for the profit of all. Our gift is not given for our self-esteem. It is given for the body. The moment we begin to measure our gift against someone else's, we have forgotten whose body this is.

Honest gratitude, then, is the first step in discovering our talents. It sounds like this: "Lord, I will stop looking at what you have given my neighbor and start looking, with quiet thankfulness, at what You have given me." It is a small prayer, but it opens a door. Because the moment we stop comparing, we begin to see. The things we had dismissed as "not really gifts" — the patience with children that runs in our bones, the quiet way we know when a neighbor is hurting before anyone else has noticed, the stubborn ability to keep a meeting running on time — begin to appear, slowly, as exactly the silver the Master has placed in our hands.

St. Macarius the Great, writing out of the desert to monks who themselves struggled with comparison, said it beautifully:

"The grace of God is distributed to each according to his measure, and each is called to serve with his own measure and not with the measure of another. The one who serves faithfully with a small gift is greater before God than the one who serves carelessly with a large one." — St. Macarius the Great, Spiritual Homilies XXXVII

Greater before God. The sentence should lift a weight off of every servant who reads it. We are not in a competition. We are in a garden, and each plant has been placed exactly where its particular kind of light will help it grow.

The Shape of a Spiritual Gift

What, then, does a spiritual gift actually look like in the ordinary life of a servant? We sometimes imagine that the gifts St. Paul lists — teaching, prophecy, healing, wisdom, hospitality, mercy — belong only to the spectacularly equipped, the platform speakers and famous abbots. This is a quiet lie, and it keeps many good servants from ever stepping forward.

A spiritual gift, in the life of an ordinary disciple, is usually not a flash of fire. It is a quiet strength that shows up when we serve. It is the thing we find, somewhat to our surprise, that we can do with a certain ease — not because we are clever, but because the Spirit has placed it in us. It is the thing others seem to notice before we do. It is the thing that, when we are doing it, leaves us tired but not drained — spent, but strangely filled.

St. Paul, writing to his own disciple Timothy, speaks of the gift as something Timothy already possesses but must consciously stir up:

"Do not neglect the gift that is in you, which was given to you by prophecy with the laying on of the hands of the eldership. Meditate on these things; give yourself entirely to them, that your progress may be evident to all." (1 Timothy 4:14–15, NKJV)

The gift is already in us — we did not acquire it by our effort, and we cannot misplace it by our failures. But it must be stirred. A gift left untouched does not grow; it grows quietly smaller. A gift stirred up — by use, by prayer, by the encouragement of the church — grows strong enough to carry souls. St. Paul adds a second, even more direct word later in the same letter: "Therefore I remind you to stir up the gift of God which is in you through the laying on of my hands" (2 Timothy 1:6, NKJV). Twice in two

short letters, the Apostle urges his beloved disciple to keep the flame alive. If Timothy needed the reminder, so do we.

There is a modest spiritual practice here that every servant can take on. Once a month — perhaps on the first Saturday, perhaps at the beginning of Lent or Advent, perhaps simply on a quiet Sunday evening — sit down with pen and paper and ask: "Lord, what have I done in the last month that felt, even briefly, like You were working through me? Where did I find strength I did not bring with me? Where did I find words I did not plan?" The answers to those questions are often the clearest window we have into what the Lord has actually placed in our hands.

St. Basil the Great, counseling those entering the ascetic life, saw this kind of honest self-examination not as pride but as obedience:

"Each of us ought to consider carefully what spiritual gift he has received from God, and bring it faithfully into the common service of the brethren. To hide the gift out of false modesty is as disobedient as to flaunt it out of pride." — St. Basil the Great, The Long Rules, Q. 7

False modesty is not a virtue. It is a quiet disobedience that dresses up as humility. The Lord has not hidden the talent in our ground to protect us; He has placed it in our hand to invest.

Gifts Are the Giver's, Not Ours

Here is the second great danger, and every servant who begins to discover his talents must meet it eventually: the quiet slide from gratitude to ownership. It happens so subtly we rarely catch the moment. We begin by saying, "Thank you, Lord, for what You have placed in my hand." A season later we are saying, "What I can do for this parish." A season after that, we are quietly wounded when someone else is asked to do the thing we had come to think of as our contribution.

The Fathers saw this drift long before any of us did. St. Paul, writing to the Ephesians, sets the whole framework of the gift inside a single word: the Giver.

"I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called, with all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love, endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." (Ephesians 4:1–3, NKJV)

Notice the posture before the gifts are even mentioned. Lowliness. Meekness. Longsuffering. These are not the character traits of a person who owns what he has; they are the character traits of a person who knows he has been lent everything. St. Paul then moves directly into the list of gifts Christ has given to the Church (vv. 11–13), but only after he has set the posture. The posture is the prerequisite. Without it, the gifts become private property. With it, they remain what they always were: the Lord's generosity working through our hands.

There is a practical discipline here that guards the servant's heart. When we catch ourselves being praised for a gift — a sermon well received, a class that went beautifully, a meal prepared with love for

a grieving family — the holiest thing we can do in the moment is to pass the praise up. A quiet "glory to God" under the breath, a single sign of the cross on the way out of the room, a whispered Psalm at the kitchen sink as the dishes clatter: all of these are small acts of returning the gift to its Giver. They are not performances of humility. They are the servant's own safety.

St. Augustine, writing to a friend who was being widely praised as a preacher and was beginning to feel the weight of the attention, left a line worth copying onto the inside of every servant's heart:

"You have nothing that you did not receive. If, then, you received it, why do you boast as if you had not received it? Whatever you have, return it with thanksgiving, and you will find that the Giver has only begun to give." — St. Augustine, echoing 1 Corinthians 4:7 (Sermon 159)

The Giver has only begun to give. That is a promise worth holding on to. The servant who returns every gift with thanksgiving is never impoverished; he has simply placed his silver in the only bank that pays in eternal interest. And he has kept his heart free for the next gift the Lord is already preparing to entrust.

The Servant of One Talent

The parable of the talents ends with a sad figure, and we should not pass over him too quickly, because most of us, on our weaker days, have flirted with becoming him. He is the servant of one talent. He received less than the others, and he compared. He decided, somewhere in his heart, that since his portion was small, it was not really worth investing. He dug a hole. He buried the silver. He told himself a story about his master that justified his inaction:

"Then he who had received the one talent came and said, 'Lord, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you have not sown, and gathering where you have not scattered seed. And I was afraid, and went and hid your talent in the ground. Look, there you have what is yours.'" (Matthew 25:24–25, NKJV)

Read those words slowly. There is so much self-justification in them that it aches. He calls the master hard. He blames the hardness of the master for his own fear. He says, with false courtesy, "there you have what is yours," as though returning an untouched talent were a kindness rather than a waste. And yet the master's response is not anger at the inventory; it is sorrow at the fear itself. The tragedy of the one-talent servant is not that he had little. The tragedy is that he let his fear of his own littleness keep him from doing anything at all.

Let us be honest with ourselves. How often, in our own service, have we quietly buried the one talent in our hands because we could not see it growing into five? How often have we declined to teach the small class because the large one was given to someone else? How often have we failed to visit the quiet parishioner in the hospital because we told ourselves we had nothing important to say? How often have we withheld the quiet, unspectacular gift we actually possess, because we did not believe the Lord could do anything meaningful with a single talent?

The Lord can. He does. The whole history of the Church has been written by one-talent servants who did not bury what they were given. St. Paul reminds the Corinthians that the strength of God is in fact most visible through the weakness of His servants:

"But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us." (2 Corinthians 4:7, NKJV)

Earthen vessels. Clay pots. The servant does not need to be a silver chalice to carry the treasure; he only needs to be open-mouthed and unburied. The single talent entrusted to us, handed back to the Lord with love, becomes in His hands a multiplying thing. And we are the ones He chooses to do it through.

Bringing It Home

So how, practically, does a servant go about discovering his talents? Not through a personality test, and not through a dramatic spiritual experience, though neither of those is forbidden. The ordinary road is gentler and steadier. It has four small landmarks, and any of us can walk it beginning this week.

The first landmark is prayer. Let us ask the Lord, directly and plainly, "What have You placed in my hand?" He is not offended by the question. He is, in fact, delighted that we are finally asking it. The Father does not hide His children's gifts from them; He waits for them to ask, so that the discovery can come as a conversation between Father and child rather than as a performance review.

The second landmark is the voice of the Church. The people around us — our fathers of confession, our fellow servants, the parishioners we serve — often see what we cannot see. A father of confession who says, "You have a real gift for listening to young men," is not flattering us; he is telling us what the Holy Spirit has been showing him. The servant who listens to the Church's voice about his gifts discovers them more quickly than the servant who tries to figure them out alone.

The third landmark is willing experimentation. Many of us will not know what is in our hand until we begin to use it. A gift discovered is almost never a gift identified in advance; it is a gift noticed in the middle of use. So let us say yes, this year, to the small, ordinary invitations to serve. Let us teach the class no one else wants. Let us visit the shut-in no one else has time for. Let us stand at the welcome table when the weather is cold and no one is waiting to greet the newcomers. In the midst of those quiet services, the Lord often reveals to us, with a kind of startled joy, what He has placed in our hands.

The fourth landmark is faithfulness over flash. Whatever the Lord shows us we have been given, let us commit to use it without needing applause. A talent used in a hidden place, for a small audience, with no recognition, is still multiplying. The Master is not grading on visibility. He is grading on faithfulness.

May the Lord who entrusted His wealth to servants like us give us the courage, tonight, to look at what is already in our hands and to see it plainly. May He keep us from the quiet disobedience of false modesty and from the quieter disobedience of private ownership. And may He, at the end of the long day of our service, say to each of us — not because we were great, but because we were faithful — "Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your lord."

Review Questions

1. The master in the parable of the talents "gave to each according to his own ability" (Matthew 25:15, NKJV). What does that detail tell us about how the Lord has distributed gifts, and how does it guard us against the two dangers of comparison and of false modesty?
2. St. John Chrysostom warns that no one is exempt from the parable — no one has been handed nothing. What is one gift we have quietly dismissed as "not really counting" that the Lord may in fact be asking us to invest?
3. St. Paul tells Timothy twice to stir up the gift that is in him. What is one concrete practice we can take on this month — prayer, examination, conversation with a father of confession, trying a new area of service — to stir up the gift the Lord has given us?
4. The slide from gratitude to ownership is subtle. Can we recall a moment when we felt quietly wounded that someone else was asked to do the thing we had begun to think of as ours? What does St. Augustine's reminder — "you have nothing that you did not receive" — invite us to do with that memory?
5. The servant of one talent was not condemned for having little. He was condemned for burying what he had. Where, in our own service right now, have we been burying a small gift because we could not see it growing into something larger? What would it look like to dig it up this week?

Books & References

Scripture: Matthew 25:14–30; 1 Corinthians 12:4–7; 1 Timothy 4:14–15; 2 Timothy 1:6; Ephesians 4:1–13; 2 Corinthians 4:7 (NKJV throughout)

Further Reading:

- St. John Chrysostom, Homily 78 on the Gospel of St. Matthew.
- St. Macarius the Great, Spiritual Homilies, especially Homily XXXVII.
- St. Basil the Great, The Long Rules (on discerning and using one's spiritual gifts in community).
- St. Augustine, Sermon 159 (on 1 Corinthians 4:7 and the gratitude of the gifted).
- St. Theophan the Recluse, The Path to Salvation (on stirring up the gift of God).

All Scripture quotations in this lesson are from the New King James Version (NKJV).

Lesson Notes