

PARTNERS IN THE FAMILY BUSINESS

Third in a series on stewardship by Dr. Rick Perrin from Matthew 25:14-30

“It is just like a man about to go on a journey, who called his own slaves, and entrusted his possessions to them.” Matthew 25:14

A number of years ago I came to know a young businessman. Trey’s grandfather had built an empire of automobile dealerships across the city. When the old man died he arranged for the various dealerships to be divided among his three children. Trey’s dad took control of the flagship sales outlet, and Trey grew up in luxury and enjoyed a carefree adolescence. But then Trey’s dad died suddenly, and at about age twenty-two Trey found himself as the owner and manager of the dealership. But times were changing. The dealership languished in an older part of town, and Trey had little or no training in how to run a business. Consequently, he was in financial trouble when someone first brought him to our church one Sunday morning and a few weeks later I had the privilege of leading him and his wife to trust Christ as their Savior.

It was at that time I learned a maxim about business. The first generation builds. The second generation maintains. And the third generation goes bankrupt. Then I learned another truth: Being a Christian does not guarantee success. Trey investigated a number of options and creative ideas for his dealership. It was clear he needed to move to another location, but by that time other franchises for the same automobile had staked out the most lucrative territories in the suburbs, and Trey was stymied. In addition, even if he’d wanted to, he was under-capitalized to launch a radical company makeover. In the end Trey did nothing, his dealership grew weaker, and finally Trey closed it down.

In Matthew 25 we have a story Jesus told about doing business. The context is important to keep in mind. It is the final week of Jesus’ ministry and the Lord is in Jerusalem with his disciples. He tells them that the day will soon come when Jerusalem will be burned and the temple destroyed. Of course, the first question the disciples want to ask is, “When will this happen?” So in Matthew 24 Jesus talks about what will happen in the future and about the day that he will come again. The passage we’re studying today begins in verse 14 with the word “*It*.” What is “*It*?” The answer is found back in the first verse of Matthew 25. Jesus is talking about the kingdom of heaven. The phrase, *kingdom of heaven*, has several meanings in the Bible, but in verse 14 Jesus is referring to the period between his ascension and his second coming when he will return at the head of an army of angels to take control of the Earth.

Verse 14 says, “*It is just like a man about to go on a journey, who called his own slaves, and entrusted his possessions to them.*” What follows, then, is a parable that teaches us something about the period in which we now live. The man about to go on a journey obviously is Jesus himself. The word, *slaves*, is sometimes translated, *servants*. Several of the New Testament letters written by the apostles begin with the apostle’s name and the description they give themselves: “a *bondslave*” or “a *servant* of Jesus Christ.” This is what we are too. We who have trusted Christ as our Savior are his servants, his bondslaves. So, this is a parable about us. The Lord calls his servants, and what does he do? He hands his possessions over to them. He assigns them to manage the

family business in his absence. He places everything in their hands. The word that the Bible uses to describe the arrangement where a servant manages the possessions of the lord and master is, *steward*. A steward possesses authority over the assets under his control, and he is responsible and accountable to conduct the business of the master as the master would have him do.

Next, Jesus describes how the master divides up the assets. *“To one he gave five talents, to another, two, and to another, one, each according to his own ability.”* (v 15) He’s giving out talents. What is a talent? When I was a boy I figured like many of you probably do, that talents are talents in the sense of “abilities.” I remember a Sunday School class where our teacher had us talk about what talents we possessed. This always troubled me a bit. My parents thought I had a talent to play the cello. After six weeks of screeching we put that one to rest. But I did think I had some talent making models, although I wasn’t sure how Jesus could use that. And like every other boy in our town, I thought I might perhaps have enough talent to play baseball in the major leagues. I surely could imagine myself winning the World Series: Last game, bottom of the ninth, and Rick Perrin strikes out the side! Or hits a home run! Or both. Why limit it?.

But abilities are not what Jesus was talking about when he referred to talents. A talent was a unit of monetary reckoning. If this was gold, a talent would be the equivalent of a year’s wage for a working man. So, for discussion’s sake, let’s say a talent was worth \$50,000 in our money. The master gives the first steward about \$250,000, the second gets \$100,000, and the third gets \$50,000. Now, notice that the master gives each steward an amount that corresponds with his ability. Have you noticed that some people have a “talent” for making money? I’ve recently taken out a subscription to *Forbes* magazine because I don’t possess that “talent” but I’m interested in the world of finance. So now I’m introduced to a world where people do have the ability to make money, and the advertisements are not for Toyotas and Chevrolets, but for Maseratis and Aston Martins and Bentleys and Rolls Royces. Did you know, for example, that you can get a Rolls for as little as about \$450,000? However, there are only thirty Rolls dealerships in the entire United States. You’ll have to go to Atlanta to buy one. Well, this first steward has some ability, apparently, and the master gives him a cool quarter million to do something with. That’s not going to get him into a Rolls, but it’s still a good start if you want to make some money.

We said at the outset that this parable is about us. As Jesus spoke to his apostles they were listening carefully. He was going away. He was leaving the work of building his church and making disciples to them. Twelve guys charged with the task of preaching the gospel everywhere in the world. Some of the apostles had a lot of ability, and Jesus gave them a larger part of the task. They’re the ones we know the best. John wrote a gospel and three New Testament letters. When Barb and I were in Ephesus we saw what is supposedly his tomb. Peter wrote two New Testament letters and guided Mark in writing his gospel. When I was in India a number of years ago I visited the Church of St. Thomas. A very ancient branch of the church still preaches the gospel faithfully in India. Others of the apostles had less ability and did a smaller part of the work. But all in all, it had to be a daunting task. It didn’t take them long to figure out

that the work would not be finished in their lifetime. So the apostles realized that part of their responsibility was to pass the job onto those who would follow them.

The work of Christ has been passed through the generations to us. During this period before Jesus returns, you and I have the privilege of being partners in his family business. The master is not here in a physical sense. He's left his church in our hands. And he's given each of us "talents" to invest in advancing his kingdom. Some of those talents probably are talents. Some of them are spiritual gifts he's dispensed. Some of it is our background. I've got two generations of Presbyterian ministers in front of me. I'm equipped in a way others of you are not. My family has a rich Christian heritage. You may be the first believer in your family line. Some of your families gave you advantages that mine did not. Some of us have resources of wealth. Others have incomes that are quite modest. Each of the factors that make us who we are have been given us by God and they determine the job assignment the master gives us. But make no mistake: each of us has been called to serve in the Father's business and to build Christ's church using what he has given us. What a very special privilege that is!

Now, look at the results. Verse 16 says the first steward took the five talents and traded with them. He went into business and over the period of his master's absence he doubled the investment. He makes five talents more. Now he has ten--and that could put him behind the wheel of a Rolls Royce, if they'd had them then. Verse 17 says the guy who got the \$100,000 invested his money and he too doubled it, and now he has \$200,000. Verse 18, however, tells us that the third fellow, the one who got only \$50,000, dug a hole and buried his money until the master returned. I've always felt a little sympathy for this poor fellow. He won't waste it or blow the money placed in his care on frivolous things for himself. He is honest. But on the other hand, he doesn't want to risk losing the money either. He probably remembered the Great Depression when the banks failed. Or he read too much about Enron. So, hide it. Keep it safe. Some of us are conservatives like that. We don't know how to make money so we horde what we have and worry more about losing it than using it. But keep in mind, although Jesus doesn't say so specifically, the clear implication is that we are expected to use the money to advance the master's family business. It's profit that he's after.

And then the day comes when finally the master returns. In Matthew 16:27 Jesus said, *"The Son of Man is going to come in the glory of His Father with His angels; and will then recompense every man according to his deeds."* That's what this parable is about. The master sits down with each of his stewards and goes over the books. The first steward reports in verse 20, *"Master, you entrusted five talents to me; see, I have gained five more talents."* Look carefully at the master's response in verse 21. *"His master said to him, 'well done, good and faithful slave; you were faithful with a few things, I will put you in charge of many things, enter into the joy of your master.'"*

The master does three things. First, he acknowledges the steward's work and commends him. There's a story told about a missionary who was returning home after a lifetime of service in some remote spot in Africa. On the same ship with him was Theodore Roosevelt who was returning from a big game hunting safari. As the ship

docked in New York harbor, huge crowds had gathered, bands were playing, and dignitaries were ready to give speeches of welcome to the former President. The missionary watched all of this and began to feel a little sorry for himself. “Lord,” he prayed, “I’ve given my whole life working in Africa. I’ve suffered disease and endured discomforts. Nobody has noticed my service for you. Here I am returning home and nobody is here to greet me.” And it was though he heard the voice of God say, “My son, you’re not home yet!” Friends, Jesus Christ will not fail to notice what you do for him.

The second thing the master does is to reward his steward. “*You were faithful with a few things, I will put you in charge of many things.*” It’s a promotion! Ask any person who works for a company what he desires most and he’ll tell you, “I want to be promoted to the next level.” And so it will be. At the end, in heaven, God will hand out promotions to his faithful stewards. Finally, the third thing that the master does: He invites the steward to a party. “*Enter into the joy of your master.*” As many of you know, our son Scott works for the United States Secret Service. Each year at Christmas the President throws a party for Secret Service officers and agents and their families. How would you like to be invited to a Christmas party at the White House? Better yet, how would you like to be invited to an end of the age party in heaven when the successes of the family business are celebrated?

Now, the exact same thing happens when the master sits down with the steward to whom he had given \$100,000 to invest. The steward opens his books and shows the master that he has doubled the amount of money he had been given to work with. But then the third steward who’d been given \$50,000 comes in and sits down. He’s got some explaining to do. Notice that he tries to pin the blame for his inactivity on the master himself. He says in verse 24, “*Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you scattered no seed. And I was afraid.*” You intimidated me so I hid the money you gave me. It sounds like Donald Trump on *The Apprentice*, doesn’t it? And Donald Trump says, “You’re fired!”

Dear friends, the master has made you and me partners in the family business. We’ve been assigned to build and advance the kingdom of Christ right here, with Cornerstone as our vehicle. We’re not to look at what other churches are doing. We’re to assess what the master has given us, and then put it to work. Each of us is to take what God has given us and employ it for him. What will we do with our *talents*—talents of ability and talents of gold? One day our master will come back from his long journey. And I’ll tell you plainly, I love him. I believe you love him, too. And I want more than anything to be able to say to him on that day, “Master, working together, we’ve doubled what you gave us. See the people who have come to know Jesus. Look at the boys and girls and men and women whose lives have been changed forever. Lord, thank you for the privilege of working for you in your family business.” And one more thing: I want to hear him say to me and also to you, “Well done good and faithful servants. You were faithful in a few things. I will put you in charge of more. Come to the party!”