

Good Soil

A place for growth and nurture

Session 3.2: TALENTS

INTRODUCTION: STEWARDSHIP - FAITH IN ACTION

In this series of four sessions, we are thinking about how we put our faith into action. What is our loving response to God? **How can we be good stewards of our *time, talents, treasure and territory*?**

These sessions touch on many issues that may be challenging for us about our lifestyles, habits, attitudes, and use of resources. These are not meant to be demanding or overbearing, but rather designed to gently lead us into a place where we can trust and serve God. Take and use whatever is helpful to you in this material. Most of all, enjoy the time spent sharing and thinking together.

PREPARATION FOR GROUP LEADERS

For this session, group members will be asked to come with an example of something that shows a *talent or skill* of theirs. It could be something artistic or hand-made (e.g. baked, knitted, painted, written), something that reflects their *work* (e.g. a report or balance sheet, a certificate or award), a *photo* of something they are proud of (e.g. a garden, a room decorated, a house built), or even a song to *sing!* Please can you ensure that all the group members know this in advance and understand what they are asked to bring. You might need to encourage or help those who are less confident.

THINKING ABOUT TALENTS (for reading at home)

This session's theme is **talents**. We have previously discussed *gifts of the Spirit*, (Session 2.3), and talents were mentioned. It's perhaps useful to distinguish between *gifts of the Spirit* – being given for the work and mission of the church and the building up of the people of God – and *talents*, which can be found and used in the world in general, for the common good. Both can be God-given. But talents are not always used for God's glory (or even the common good). Sometimes talents are used for selfish gain, fame, or less honourable purposes. There can be some very talented criminals, gangsters and dictators, whose abilities could be given to better causes. (Unfortunately, the same can also be occasionally said of the more holy gifts too – when used to exploit or abuse.)

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus talks to his disciples about letting their light shine:

'You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.' (Matthew 5:14-16, NRSV)

From this, we get the well-known expression '*don't hide your light under a bushel*', which is about not concealing our talents or abilities. Everything good gift we have been given can be used for God's glory, or in the work of God's Kingdom – in sharing God's love with others.

In preparation for the group, think about your **talents**. *What skills or abilities do you feel God has given you? What talents have you used in your working life or as a volunteer? What skills have you had to develop or practise over time? What talents that could be used in many areas of life have you offered to the work of the church? What have you held back (or even hidden under a bushel!)?* You are invited to **take with you to the group something that shows a talent of yours**: something you have made, or something you can do well, something from a hobby or from your working life (actual or photo).

In the same hymn we looked at last time, Charles Wesley wrote about *talents, gifts and graces* in connection to preaching God's word and 'publishing' Christ (whom he calls 'the Sinners' Friend'). Making God known to others doesn't necessarily involve words. Our preaching can be in how we live, and how we use what God has given us:

My talents, gifts and graces, Lord,
into thy blessed hands receive;
and let me live to preach thy word,
and let me to thy glory live;
my every sacred moment spend
in publishing the sinners' friend.

by **Charles Wesley** (1707-1788),
Taken from *Singing the Faith*, no. **661**.

STARTING THE SESSION: SHOW AND TELL!

Have you brought with you an example of a talent?

The first part of the session should give plenty of time, for each member who wishes, to share, demonstrate or talk about their talent with the group. Other members of the group might want to encourage or ask questions about the talent and how it has been used in the person's life, work, or simply to bring them joy. (Baking or other culinary talents at this point can even be sampled!)

No one should feel under pressure to share, but all should be valued and encouraged. When all have had adequate time, thank God for the talents on display.

A PRAYER

Thank you, God, for the talents and abilities you give us, to enrich and build the life of our community together: for all those talents on display today, and many others besides: for our hobbies, arts and crafts, music and invention, skills and gifts in the world of work, and every other area of life. May you bless this time together as we offer it to you. Amen.

READING THE SCRIPTURES AND DIGGING DEEPER

The English word ‘talent’ (to mean a natural skill or ability) did not exist until it developed as an idea from a parable told by Jesus. In the original Greek, *talanton* meant a weight or sum of money. This was translated by the Western Church into Latin, *talenta* (or *talentum* – plural) and centuries of churchgoing and reflecting on sermons meant that these words became associated with the natural gifts or abilities the Christians felt were entrusted to them by God (in the way the master entrusts the money to the servants in the story). It’s a strange example of how the meaning of a word that originally meant something quite different has changed quite radically, directly thanks to the teaching of Jesus.

Reading: Matthew 25: 14-30 (New Revised Standard Version)

¹⁴ ‘For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; ¹⁵ to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. ¹⁶ The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. ¹⁷ In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. ¹⁸ But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master’s money.

¹⁹ ‘After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. ²⁰ Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, “Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents.” ²¹ His master said to him, “Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.”

²² ‘And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, “Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made

two more talents.”²³ His master said to him, “Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.”

²⁴ ‘Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, “Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed;²⁵ so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.”²⁶ But his master replied, “You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter?²⁷ Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest.²⁸ So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents.²⁹ For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away.³⁰ As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

There is a harshness in this story that perhaps reflects where Jesus was at the time. As Matthew tells it, Jesus was in Jerusalem, in his final week. The spiritual atmosphere was different to that in rural Galilee, and Jesus himself would have been feeling the tension building, instinctively knowing how the week would end. The ending to the parable may reflect Jesus’ feelings toward the religious leaders in Jerusalem, perhaps feeling that they have squandered or buried the gifts God has given them in their scriptures and heritage. Or it could be that Jesus is using dramatic language, even humorous overstatement, to give the story a dark and unexpected ending.

What do you think the message of this story is? What would it mean to the original hearers of the parable? What can it mean for us today?

This parable uses the illustration of people being entrusted with money. It is clearly not just about money, but thinking of investing money to make it earn more is a useful metaphor. Of course, investing money always carries some risk. There can be reward and satisfaction when it works out, but some investments are more of a gamble and can lead to disappointment or pain. *How does this apply to the God-given talents and natural abilities we have?*

How easy or hard do we find it to put our talents to 'work'? Are you someone who naturally tends to keep quiet about your talents or gifts?

What is the relationship between risk and reward? Is it easier for the person who is given more to take more risks?

The third servant in the story was nervous because he understood quite well that the money did not belong to him in the first place. He knew it was precious and he thought he needed to be extra careful with it, frightened to lose it. *Do we think of our talents as 'belonging to us'? Or do we think of them as 'entrusted to us', to be stewarded well?*

Perhaps this parable gives us an insight into the mind of God – that we should not be nervous in sharing (or investing) what God has entrusted us with. *We can easily pick up on the anger of the master towards the 1-talent slave, but did you notice the sheer joy of the master for the others who did well?* (See verses 21 and 23). God takes great delights when we put our gifts and talents to good use.

We might ask what the reaction of the master would have been if the 1-talent slave had invested it and lost it! *Do you think he would have been more forgiving?*

What do you make of the ending to this story? Does it shock you? What effect do you think Jesus intended it to have?

Verse 29 seems to be a commentary on 'the way of the world' and wealth distribution as we are seeing it at the moment. *Is this fair?*

Can you think of ways your talents, skills, abilities, interests or gifts might be put to good use in the church, in the wider community, or for the 'common good'?

ADDITIONAL: IF YOU HAVE TIME

Reading: Exodus 31: 1-11 (New Revised Standard Version)

The LORD spoke to Moses: ² See, I have called by name Bezalel son of Uri son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah: ³ and I have filled him with divine spirit, with ability, intelligence, and knowledge in every kind of craft, ⁴ to devise artistic designs, to work in gold, silver, and bronze, ⁵ in cutting stones for setting, and in carving wood, in every kind of craft. ⁶ Moreover, I have appointed with him Oholiab son of Ahisamach, of the tribe of Dan; and I have given skill to all the skilful, so that they may make all that I have commanded you: ⁷ the tent of meeting, and the ark of the covenant, and the mercy-seat that is on it, and all the furnishings of the tent, ⁸ the table and its utensils, and the pure lampstand with all its utensils, and the altar of incense, ⁹ and the altar of burnt-offering with all its utensils, and the basin with its stand, ¹⁰ and the finely worked vestments, the holy vestments for the priest Aaron and the vestments of his sons, for their service as priests, ¹¹ and the anointing-oil and the fragrant incense for the holy place. They shall do just as I have commanded you.

This Old Testament passage comes from the time of Moses and the Israelites in the wilderness. It is interesting that we have, recorded for all time, the names of two craftsmen – **Bezalel and Oholiab** – who played such a key part in the making of the religious artefacts and holy place of worship for the people of Israel. There is a sense that their natural talents and abilities in carving and crafting are given special significance by God. These ‘artisan’ gifts are *extra* to the gift of the Holy Spirit (verse 3-4) but also given by God. Verse 6 is particularly interesting: “*I have given skill to all the skilful, so that they may make all that I have commanded you...*”. It suggests that some had natural skill already, but God endowed them with extra – like icing on the cake, because they would put their skill to use for God’s work.

How much do we value the work of those who are gifted with their hands in building, architecture, skilled labour, and practical work?

God rejoices when skills are put to good use. *How can we show our appreciation for the skilled tradespeople, artisans, builders and contractors, who help to shape and equip our place of worship?*

Do we perhaps view our 'property and finance work' as less important or less 'spiritual' than the more obvious gifts in worship? Why?

Can you now think of any other ways your talents, skills, abilities, interests or gifts might be put to good use in the church or community?

PRAYING TOGETHER

- Thank God for the fellowship you've shared together;
- Thank God for the talents and skills you've thought about or shared together;
- Pray for those who use their talents for the good of all in the community, or in our church, in so many ways;
- Pray for those who feel they have no talents to offer, or whose offers are often spurned;
- Pray for any who are in need of healing or comfort at the moment; or those suffering in our world.
- Pray that we will be good stewards of all God gives us.
- You might like to say **the Lord's Prayer** together:

**Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your Name,
your kingdom come, your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins,
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial, and deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours,
now and for ever. Amen.**

SUGGESTED SONGS TO LISTEN TO (or your own choice)

Please use the links below or search on  YouTube

I will offer up my life, by Matt Redman.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kQkzHwz2eLE>

Gifts from God, by Chris Tomlin.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cfLGfulNnG4>

We all have gifts to share, by Susan Kay Wyatts.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G8vfPPfQ0bo>

COMING SOON in GOOD SOIL...

Session 3.3: TREASURE

Session 3.4: TERRITORY

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