

November 19, 2017
Matthew 25:14-30
Talents, Choice, and Faithfulness.
Michael Stanfield

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

After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. 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.” 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.”

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.” 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.”

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; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.”

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? 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.

So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. 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. As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” The Words of God for the people of God. Let us pray. Bless this familiar story, Oh Lord that we may here it anew and get a glimpse of our path and our way. Amen.

This passage is about making good choices.

AT&T has always billed itself as being “The Right Choice.” Well back in the 2000’s, AT&T struck an agreement with New York City’s power company Con Ed that whenever demand strained the utility’s grid, AT&T would throw a switch, unplug some of its facilities, and draw power from internal generators at its 33 Thomas Street station in lower Manhattan.

And that’s what happened on September 17, 2001. But the power surge of generators kicking in also kicked out vital rectifiers – rectifiers that handled 4.5 million domestic calls, 470,000

international calls, 1,174 flights across the nation carrying 85,000 passengers, and the total communications system linking air traffic controllers at LaGuardia, Kennedy and Newark airports.

For six long hours alarm bells rang inside 33 Thomas Street. But the problem was, nobody heard them. The reason? Nobody was there. The new demands of being a corporate giant in a more competitive environment with cell phones taking over the whole communications market made the executives of AT&T decide to send all of its Thomas Street personnel in charge of these rectifiers to a one-day seminar.

The title of this seminar was: Get this: “How to Handle Emergencies.” AT&T recognized that choosing to hunker down by expecting and planning for things to go wrong can actually make you unavailable and unprepared when they actually do.

What we choose to focus on matters. But the kinds of choices we think we need are not necessarily making our lives any better. People in our culture expect to have choices *everywhere* regarding *everything*.

We stay away from places and people that don't give us choices – don't we? How long would any restaurant last today that only offered one food on its menu? Even McDonald's has tried branching out into pizza and pasta and health food. Likewise, the age of singular big movie theaters is long over. We expect the choices offered by our Cineplex, which packs 6 to 12 movies into one location.

But the shock waves from this choice explosion of the late 20th and early 21st century, has deep ripples that reach into our souls in some troubling ways. Steven Waldman has written an article in New Republic magazine entitled “The Tyranny of Choice.” In this article, Waldman draws up a kind of checklist of the personal consequences suffered by people due to what he calls “the choice conflagration” (“The Tyranny of Choice,” New Republic, 27 January 1992, 22-25).

First, Waldman claims that our culture seeks to give us choice without limits. But Waldman reminds us that “choice without limits erodes commitment.” He points out that the pressure to upgrade, to always be the most current “...can help explain everything from the rise of the pathological channel switcher who can never watch a TV show straight through to staggering divorce rates and employer-employee disloyalty.” (Waldman, 23)

So, ironically, the demand for greater freedom of choice has resulted in less time to make all those choices. Thus, less free time goes with all these new so-called freedoms. It is not just hazy reminiscing that makes us believe we used to have more unscheduled moments in our lives.

Sociology professor John P. Robinson of the University of Maryland has recently studied the “time diaries” (daily appointment books like Day-Timers) of busy people from 1965, 1975, and 1985. His findings not only confirm our own suspicions that we are busier than we used to be, but he suggests just what it is that is eating up all our days and nights. “Much of our free time,” Robinson concludes, “is absorbed by the process of deciding what to do with it.” (Waldman, 23)

Consider the lines you've stood in just to get into that great new movie, just to get the latest and greatest technological gadget, just to get the newest fashion in clothes at a sale.

Consider the amount of time spent, surfing the internet for the same said items.

If you have cable TV and an internet hook-up to your TV, consider the amount of time you spend not just surfing cable but deciding whether you are going to settle on watching something *on* cable, or on Net-flicks, Amazon, or Hulu. One can then spend hours inside any one of *those* options trying to decide what to watch.

And an even more depressing consequence of all this free choice is the revelation that our number of bad choices goes up in direct proportion. "The more choices there are," Waldman writes, "the more wrong choices there are – and the higher the odds that I'll make a mistake." (Waldman, 23)

A corollary to this rule is Waldman's observation that because of the number of choices we have available to us today, in everything from entertainment, to cars, college courses to religious affiliations, and because statistically we are apt to make a large number of poor choices, many have now lost the will to even try to make the best choices.

William Shakespeare foresaw this most modern of dilemmas over 450 years ago. In Shakespeare's Hamlet, if you'll remember the story, Hamlet's father, the king of Denmark is killed by Claudius, the king's brother and Hamlet's uncle. Claudius then marries Hamlet's mother and assumes the throne.

The better part of the play focuses on Hamlet's brooding, his anxiety, and his fear that if he acts on his father's behalf, he will do the wrong thing.

Hamlet is the classic navel gazer who is so concerned about doing the right thing that he lets the wrong things happen and ends up reacting to tragedies which could have been averted if he had only done *something* – anything. Even if Hamlet had avenged his father's death swiftly and efficiently it might have been better than being paralyzed by fear and indecision and initially doing nothing – Because due to Hamlet's paralysis, a series of tragic consequences ensue.

- His self-centered anxiety finally completely overrules his love for his fiancé, Ophelia who goes insane when Hamlet cruelly spurns her such that she finally commits suicide.

- Overcome by guilt, Hamlet then becomes impulsive causing him to accidentally kill Ophelia's father, Polonius.

- Hamlet then becomes wreck-less and even suicidal himself. He ends up killing Claudius, and Laertes, Ophelia's brother, and even contributes to the death of his own mother before he dies completely alone and regretful.

Refusing to act out of when you have gifts that can put to good use is deadly. In fact, it is the undoing of the one talent servant. And it may also be our undoing when we refuse to act – when we refuse to use what God gave us because we are afraid that we will do the wrong thing. I believe that the moral of Hamlet as well as the moral of this parable of Jesus is that even doing the “wrong” thing is better than doing nothing at all.

There is an old saying in baseball, “You can’t be charged with an error unless you touch the ball.”

This seemed to be the motto of the one talent servant. But the problem with this is that refusing to even try to touch the ball makes a player – makes the servant, worthless – to everyone around him and especially to his master. Trying to do *something* with our talents is better than doing nothing at all.

Yet given more and more choices, we become less and less concerned with making good decisions. To make a truly informed decision would take so much time and effort researching all the options, that we understandably just give up.

It is no surprise, then, that choice without limits also leads to political alienation. It causes social fragmentation. We have grown so used to being identified as so many sub-groups, consumer markets, minority opinions and economic divisions, that we can no longer envision ourselves as part of a whole – not a whole city, county, state or nation – not a whole Church or denomination, and certainly not a whole human race. We *choose* our own identity, conservative, liberal, moderate, but consequently, we lose our sense of unity.

Not feeling connected to anything – not even God, we are left, like both Hamlet and the one talent servant – feeling alone and lost – in the outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth.

In *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics* (New York: Norton, 1991) historian Christopher Lasch says a critical juncture came in American Culture in the 1960s when we crowned choice above duty as our highest moral value, and proposed that “one’s highest duty is to oneself.”

Waldman, in his article seems to further this line of reasoning when he makes the ironic conclusion that “complete focus on choice actually erodes the self.” (Waldman, 24). In other words, the very thing that our culture believes will set us free to be who we truly are, ends up tearing us apart.

Waldman finally diagnoses us choice-junkies as suffering from “multiphrenia” – a condition where the self “frantically flails about trying to take advantage of this sea of choices.” (Waldman, 25) We have all had our bouts with multiphrenia. Its consequences are that instead of feeling satisfied and choice-satiated, (like the five talent and the two talent servants) we are filled with self-doubt and gnawing anxiety (like the one talent servant).

So what is the answer? Given this sea of choices, what are we to do? Well, it seems to me that the master's judgement of the servant who buried the talent reveals that if we wish to be disciples, to call ourselves faithful servants, we need to do more with the gifts we have been given than worry about our own well-being.

God gives immense gifts into our care out of love; therefore the proper response is to use them but to do so *in* service and in love.

Making decisions, given the staggering alternatives and the likelihood of dire consequences is never easy. But choosing in every arena of our lives becomes less troublesome when the right goal is in view.

And it seems to me that the right goal as presented in this story of the talents is really rather simple – faithful service to a loving God, rather than self-preservation at all costs. If all our actions are centered on at least *trying* to act faithfully in serving a God who truly loves us, the eventual result, according to this parable, is that we enter into the joy of the Master – we share from the banquet table of the heavenly king. But not having the view that God cares or loves us tends to leave us feeling as that one talent servant did – alone in a hostile, unfair and unforgiving culture.

And nothing has the power to encourage us to focus on service and faithfulness an like an understanding of our mortality – that our time on this earth is limited. One of the most powerful, positive stories of faithful service I know of is told by writer Niel Lorenz of Dayton, Ohio. Lorenz tells how her friend, a young wife and mother of three, chose to spend the last year of her life while afflicted with cancer:

“Linda made it clear from the beginning that cancer was inconvenient, annoying and unwelcome, but that it would not rule her life. Accordingly, she and her whole family continued to take scuba lessons at a local pool to prepare for a big family vacation in the Cayman Islands. Linda was determined not just to go, but to participate in the family holiday. So adamant was she about this that when her blood count proved dismal the day before the intended trip, she simply checked herself into the hospital overnight, and received the medication she needed through an all-night I.V. connection.

Once in the islands, she rested and watched her family go out for their daily excursions to the reef. But she wanted to go diving with them, be a participant, not just an observer. In response to her incredible determination and positive spirit, a group of local diving instructors devised a way that she could join her family.

Because her spine was too brittle and ulcerated to bear the weight of the tank, they fitted her with a mask and mouthpiece and, as she breathed in it, they weighted her just enough to put her under the water. Then they floated an oxygen tank on a piece of foam above her and carefully added weights until Linda, the divers, and the tank slipped slowly beneath the surface. For nearly an hour the entire family was able to explore the wonders of the island reefs.

Later, when Linda's husband Steve tried to pay for all the extra time and effort the dive team had gone to, he was turned down with these words:

"We dive here every day. We have seen that reef literally hundreds of times. We know every rock, every piece of coral and practically every fish on it. Today, however, we saw it through the eyes of someone with such courage, such spirit and such a zest for living that we looked at it in a different way. It is we who thank you and your family for the day. It is we who can never repay you."

The gifts that God gives us are immense. But sometimes life does seem too overwhelming; sometimes it just doesn't seem worth the effort to expend the energy. But one thing is for certain, if we will only be as faithful as we can with the gifts we've been given, God will bless us in ways we had never imagined.

Let us pray. Gracious God, thank you for the great gifts we have been given – including the freedom to choose among many wonderful options. Help us to commitment the one option most important – you and your loving service.

Now bless these gifts that we give with no strings attached that they may be a sign of that commitment to you. In Christ's name we pray, amen.