

Paul S. Rees, D.D. (Continued from Page One)

"For the kingdom of heaven is as a man travelling into a far country, who called his own servants, and delivered unto them his goods" (Matthew 25:14).

In our study of the talents let us consider, to begin with, the distribution that Christ makes. A man of importance and wealth is about to take a long journey. He summons his servants, says Jesus, and announces to them that he is putting his "goods" in trust in their hands. One servant received five talents, another received two, and another, one. Perhaps Jesus had in mind the practice of under-rulers, or local kings, who would occasionally journey to Rome for a session with the emperor. In such cases trusted officials were left in charge of their affairs.

Whatever the background of the picture may have been, the important point with which one must begin is that every servant received something in trust. The distribution was not equal in quantity but it was equal in extent. No one was left without a talent.

Now this immediately raises the question of what is meant by the word "talent." Lord Macaulay long ago reminded the English-speaking world that the word entered our language through the door of this New Testament parable. Yet it is doubtful if the meaning we give to it is the same as that which Christ intended. We commonly use the word to describe any kind of skill or ability that people possess. It may be wood-carving; it may be piano-playing; it may be crocheting.

Here, at any rate, is a case in which the popular meaning given to a Biblical word is not exactly the same as the Bible itself intends. Listen again to our Lord's statement: "Unto one he gave five talents, to another two, and to another, one; to every man according to his several ability" (v. 15). "Each got according to his capacity," is the way it reads in the Moffatt New Testament. Does it not appear plainly that "talent" is identical with "ability"? Each man's ability determined what talents would be given him, and in what measure.

How then are we to interpret the term "talents"? We must find the answer, I think, not in the realm of our natural capacities but in the realm of our spiritual gifts as bestowed upon those who are members of the church of our Lord Jesus Christ. Note two things: the lord of the domain bestowed on his trusted servants "his goods"; He gave to them "talents." I like to think of the "goods" in a collective sense, as representing the total spiritual interests which Jesus has left in the hands of His church while He, as to His bodily presence, is at the right hand of the Father. The business of witnessing to the revelation of God which Jesus brought to the world—whose business is that if it is not the church's? The business of declaring to all men everywhere the great deed which Christ wrought in their behalf when upon the Cross He died for their sins and then arose for their justification—whose business is that if it does not belong to the church? The business of Christian prayer, of Christian benevolence, of Christian missions, of Christian education—whose affairs are these, I ask, if they do not rest upon the shoulders of Christ's body, the church?

My fellow believers, this is a tremendous thing that is here brought to our attention:

we are the merchantmen of the Kingdom of God, we are the tradesmen of Jesus Christ; His eternally valuable interests are in our hands. We did not choose to have it so, but it is so, nevertheless. He has ordained it this way.

I like to think of the "talents" as representing, in an individual way, the spiritual gifts which Christ has provided for His church. There are two notable passages in the writings of St. Paul that, for me at least, throw a flood of light on this question of the talents. One of them is in the fourth chapter of Ephesians, where we read of our Lord that "when he ascended up on high, he led captivity captive, and gave gifts unto men." By His life, death, and resurrection Jesus has given us a series of divine acts—the greatest of which was the act of dying for our sins—that might fitly serve as a foundation for His church. Then, upon returning to the invisible Glory from whence He came, He sends His blessed Spirit to equip His church with those spiritual skills and responsibilities that will build the church into a world-wide temple of the living God.

Paul goes on to say: "He gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers" (v. 11). What for? The next verse is the answer, and I give it to you in the Weymouth translation: "In order fully to equip His people for the work of serving—for the building up of Christ's body." Are you called to be an "evangelist"? That is your talent in the Christian church. Are you called to be a "pastor"? That is your talent. Are you called to be a "teacher"? That is your talent.

But, you say, I am not called to be any of these. All right. If you are sure of that, then follow me to the second passage in the Pauline writings. It is the twelfth chapter of First Corinthians. It opens with the statement: "Now concerning spiritual gifts, brethren, I would not have you ignorant." Then, beginning at verse 4, comes a section important and illuminating: "Now there are various kinds of gifts, but there is the same Spirit; various kinds of official service, and yet the same Lord; various kinds of effects, and yet the same God who produces all the effects in each person. But to each a manifestation of the Spirit has been granted for the common good. To one the word of wisdom has been granted through the Spirit; to another the word of knowledge by the will of the same Spirit; to one, in the same Spirit, special faith, to another gifts of healing, in the one Spirit; to another the exercise of miraculous powers; to another the gift of prophecy; to another the power of discriminating between spirits; to one varieties of the gift of 'tongues'; to another the interpretation of tongues. But all these results are brought about by one and the same Spirit, allotting them to each individual as he pleases" (I Corinthians 12:4-11, Weymouth.)

I cannot leave this chapter and return to our parable without calling your attention to something in verse 28 that seems to have been inserted deliberately by the Holy Spirit in order to convince us that every member of the church of Christ, without a single exception, has been granted some spiritual "talent." In this verse Paul speaks of the offices of apostles, prophets, teachers, miracle-workers, healers, and then he comes to the word I love—"helps." "Helps!" If you are not called to be a preacher

you can be the helper of a preacher. If you are not called to be a Sunday School teacher, you can be the helper of a Sunday School teacher. If you are not called to be a member of the governing board of your church, you can be the helper of your deacons, or trustees, or stewards, whatever be the term you use in your church.

Moss prayed for Israel, and as he prayed Israel defeated her foes; but it required the help of an Aaron and a Hur to hold up Moses' hands, to keep him encouraged and strengthened for his ministry of intercession. The holding up of the hands of another was their talent. Charles G. Finney preached with all the logic of a lawyer and all the passion of a prophet, with the result that thousands were converted, but it was Father Nash who felt called of God to go along with Mr. Finney and to be his quiet, behind-the-scenes prayer-partner. That ministry of intercessory prayer was Father Nash's talent.

Yes, God has made a distribution of talents in which all of His children are included. We are all trustees!

The next thing to be observed in our study of the parable is the demand that Christ imposes. This demand may be simply stated: we must use our talent according to our ability. The emphasis is on the word "use." Our ability may be large or small. Our talents, accordingly, may range from five to one. No matter. The one thing we must do is to put talents to work. We must trade with them. We must develop them. We must, under God, make the most of them.

I happen to be a preacher. Preaching, I believe, is my talent; that is to say, Christ has made it my calling and commission. In this respect my talent is the same as that of every other Christian minister. But my ability as a preacher is something else. Because my ability is limited God has seen fit to give me, let us say, one talent. But some of my preacher friends, with far greater abilities than I have, are undoubtedly the trustees of five talents in the work of the ministry. Now what Christ demands of them with their five talents is precisely the same as what He demands of me with my one: He requires that all of us put our talents to the best use we can make of them. If I am careless about my studying, irregular in my devotions, slovenly in my appearance, lukewarm in my spirit, half-hearted in my delivery, I shall one day look with shame into the disappointed eyes of my Lord. My ministry failed to grow as it should have. It failed to produce the fruitage that it might have yielded had I been a diligent merchantman for the Master.

Take that personal word, I beg you, and trace it out in application to your own case. Perhaps your talent is that of a lay leader in the administration of church affairs. If you are an officer in the congregation or the Sunday School, your ability may be more limited than that of others, and therefore God may have given you two talents, or even one, in place of five. But the prime question is: What are you doing to make full use of the talent you do have? You may never be elected the chairman of the official board, but are you as faithful to your task as if you were? Your five talents will never become ten unless you give the full measure of diligence and devotion to the stewardship that has been committed to you. You may never be asked to serve on a Board of Benevolence, but you can take a talent for sympathy and kindness which Christ

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