

## The Responsibility of the Lord's Servants

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*“And to one he gave five talents, to another two, and to another one, to each according to his own ability” (Matthew 25:15).*

Humanity is only a vessel, which receives life from God. This is the central truth of all religion. On the other hand, all the evils of humankind, whether they lead to domestic misery or to cruel wars, are rooted in the illusion that a person has life in himself—that the powers which he can wield, the feelings that surge within him, and the ideas which he acquires and cherishes are self-derived and that he is therefore responsible to himself alone for the use he makes of them. This fatal pride of humankind can be broken only by the confession of the real truth—that a person of himself possesses nothing of his own, but that every thing of life is a gift of God, entrusted to him as a loan.

It is this vital truth that the Lord was impressing upon His disciples in the two parables concerning the minnas and the talents. In each parable the Lord likens Himself to a master who went to a far-off country and entrusted his goods to his servants until he returned to exact an accounting. For normally each person is judged soon after death. During life on earth the Lord may seem far away, as if in a distant land, and the operations of His government are secret and invisible. When we die, the Lord, as it were, returns. His laws of judgment become apparent, and then the eternal verdict is pronounced that “whoever has, to him more will be given; and whoever does not have, even what he seems to have will be taken from him” (Luke 8:18).

We should observe that the two parables differ. In the Gospel of Luke we read of ten servants, all of whom were given the same amount—one minna each. And in human life there is something which the Lord bestows equally on all people. For everyone, because of an inmost human soul, is endowed with spiritual liberty and free choice and with rationality. These human powers are granted to all alike, even as the sun shines on the just and on the unjust. Yet, there is little reflection among people on these two interior faculties which make them responsible human beings. Some people even deny that they have spiritual freedom and think of human beings as no more spiritually accountable than animals. And, generally, people take their marvelous human faculties for granted as a possession of little value—a mere minna.

But the things upon which people set real store are the more external and conspicuous advantages which some have above others. For people are born with diverse hereditary talents, skills and capacities; they receive varied forms of education and are brought up in widely different cultural and physical surroundings. Some are gifted with health and bodily strength; some with imagination, native brilliance, retentive memory, or a genius for leadership. Some are born to wealth and others to poverty. People misname these inequalities as “accidents” of birth and fortune. They may compare them with envious and critical eyes: carefully measuring hereditary aptitudes and capacities, and taking inordinate pride in the extent of their knowledge or in the favorable environment in which Divine Providence may have placed them.

These unequal gifts, so highly valued among people, are compared in the parable in Matthew with “talents.” For a talent of silver was a sum sixty times greater than a mere “minna.” And the

master entrusted his servants—one with five talents, another with two, another with only one—“to each according to his own ability.” And “to whom much is given, from him much will be required” (Luke 12:48). Responsibility is proportionate to ability. And only the Lord’s infinite wisdom can foresee what responsibilities a person can carry. If we were able to choose our own talents, we would be headed for disaster. Therefore, we are taught to be content with our lot—content with the talents with which Divine Providence equips us, content with our own starting point in life. For our talents, be they few or many, even when accompanied by handicaps, are the measure of our responsibility, the indication of our use, the promise of the delights which can be ours eternally.

But a person must not be content merely to rely on his native endowments. As the Lord shows us in His parables, an individual’s human faculties and given talents will not remain his unless he applies them to the uses of life. It is a common failing for people to lean on natural talents and avoid the labor of training and the discipline of arduous study. Yet, talents can be retained only by being put to use. Therefore, we should not measure a person’s worth by his inherited gifts, but by the devotion with which those gifts are being developed and bent to useful purpose, not merely to satisfy his vanity or to secure selfish gain, but to give service to others—to society, to the commonwealth, to the church, and to heaven.

“To everyone that has more will be given, and he will have abundance” (Matthew 25:29). This is a universal law, with no exceptions. Without adequate capital and means, trade languishes, the world’s work suffers. Without talents to start with, there is no accomplishment. Without knowledge, progress stands still. Without seed to sow, we can obtain no harvest. Yet, in unploughed ground the seed is wasted and lost. If we do not use our knowledges or our wealth by sound investment and cultivation, they are ours only in appearance and vanish away.

As a moral law, this is widely recognized. Yet the Lord is speaking of eternity; He is giving a spiritual law. When a person dies, his spirit leaves behind him his riches or his poverty, his earthly rank and station. King or pauper, he enters a world where “nothing is secret that shall not be made manifest,” and where what a person has and what he only seemed to have is clearly seen—that is, what a person had in his interior will and understanding as differentiated from what he had only had in his memory and external thought. Simple people may become wise there—or else more simple than before. Learned people—if they had used their learning for the good of others and the glory of God—may rise into brilliant wisdom, or, if they had been unprofitable servants, become dull of thought, their knowledge forgotten. For we are taught that those who are in evils of life will lose their knowledge of good and truth, lest they communicate with heaven and disturb its holiness (*Arcana Coelestia* 4424).

This kind of vastation after death is what is meant in the parable, when it is said that the wicked and slothful servant who had buried his talent in the earth was deprived of it, and that it was given to the one who had made the best use of what he had received. The good and faithful servants, who acknowledged their responsibilities and doubled their talents by trading, were not required to return their master’s money. Instead, for being faithful in a few things, they were made rulers over many things.

In the spiritual sense, the servant who received five talents represents those who had accepted goods and truths without resistance and thus had never repudiated their childhood remains. By the servant who received two talents are meant those who join charity to faith in advanced age. But by the servant who received only one talent, and hid his master's silver in the earth, are signified those who receive the truths of faith alone without charity (*Arcana Coelestia* 5291:4). For truths which are not loved or acted on are buried among the useless memories of earth-life which are forgotten after death; while the spirit, having no internal truth, dwells in outer darkness.

A person who uses his intelligence only for his own advancement loses the right to that intelligence. For a person has no intrinsic rights. It is only as a form of use that he has a right to the enjoyment of that use. The angels wish for no other rights than this, and for no other possessions or talents than those which serve as the tools of their uses and as means by which their usefulness may be widened and perfected. They are content if the uses they love are well done, for through them they "enter into the joy" of their Lord.

Not so the unprofitable servant. He does not view his talents, or his human faculties of free choice and reason, as a trust. He will indeed proudly accept his native abilities, accept the knowledge of his times, and often the doctrine of his church, as his own but without accepting the responsibilities and conditions which go along with them. His faith becomes a faith in self, not in his Master. His faith—devoid of love or humility—is cold, like silver hidden in the earth.

And when the Master returns, we hear the sullen self-defense of the unprofitable servant. We hear his heart speak—as it must do openly after death. From his understanding comes a grudging admission, extorted by fear and indifference: "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!"

This is the familiar challenge, perennially voiced by many against the justice of God—the challenge of the servant who acknowledges no master. And if life is of the individual, if it belongs to a person, then that servant was within his rights. But if life and all its powers and faculties are the gifts of God, then that servant was a thief at heart. This must be remembered whenever we hear in our own hearts this murmuring—a complaint that the Lord has given us less talents, less means, less opportunities than others—a distrust of the Divine sight which foresees the circumstances in which we can be free and the measure of responsibility which we can bear in freedom.

What does the Lord ask of people, except that they use their borrowed powers in such a way that they may multiply and increase them and so share in the joy of their Maker? To those of small talent and little courage, He provides an alternative which none need find hard. For however little spiritual faith a person can contribute, yet he can support the good uses of others. This is like placing your lord's money with the bankers so that it may be used in the world's work and may increase to good purpose without much risk or labor. Better this than to bury his talent in the earth, or to hide it in a napkin.

But from those who benefit by plentiful instruction, and can go themselves to the mainsprings of Divine doctrine, more can be expected. Theirs is the labor and delight of spiritual trading, by which spiritual truths are continually lifted out of the memory, brought into the light of spiritual thought, and examined to see how they apply to the common uses of the church in a sphere of common enlightenment. It is these active truths that become fertile and begin to multiply and ripen into a wisdom of life that can defeat the powers of evil. The spiritual commerce of thought and reflection is sensitive to the needs of others, young and old, and it is also receptive of the enlightenment of others whose talents may have been cultivated more than our own. No person can do the Lord's work by hiding his talents or by retiring from the world by himself—neither lending nor borrowing.

But it sometimes appears that the Lord, who entrusted us with the precious gifts of His revelations, is Himself far off. Sometimes His return is eagerly prayed for, at other times it is dreaded, for who shall stand when He appears? But His judgment, when it comes, will be merciful. For to everyone that has—be it ever so little—abundance will be given. And those who have been faithful in a few things shall be given rule over many things.

Amen.

Readings: Luke 19:11-28; Matthew 25:13-30; *Last Judgment Posthumous* 230, 231