

## THE KINGDOM VISION OF ABUNDANCE<sup>1</sup>

We have another of Jesus' parables of the Kingdom today. In this case, the kingdom of God is like the situation where an estate owner departs for a journey leaving his property in the hands of the servants. Now, I would propose that we look to this parable for insights into our own lives. We're learning here something about ourselves and the spiritual situation that, as Jesus teaches us, we're in the midst of, namely the unfolding of the Kingdom of God. So what's it like for you and me to be in the early stages of God's reign, which is breaking into our world?

Well, for one, it appears normal that God seems to be absent. The master in the story is away. In some sense, we too may at least feel ourselves to be left to manage on our own.

The famous teacher of spiritual disciplines, Richard Foster, writes movingly about the 18 month period when he got no sense whatever of God's presence in his life. Imagine, a teacher of prayer suddenly finding that God feels utterly remote from his life. As it turns out the experience was beneficial because it taught Richard Foster

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<sup>1</sup>Douglas DeCelle preached this sermon on November 16, 2008 at the First Presbyterian Church, LaGrange, GA.

to maintain a strong discipline of seeking God nevertheless; hanging in there, and waiting over the long haul. And, at length, God's presence and guidance and reassurance came back for Richard Foster. We're learning today that the Kingdom entails our being on our own as the servants were on their own. In turn, we need to get comfortable functioning even if we don't have an overpowering sense of God's presence and power. Basically, you and I are to work in the world to build a world that God can use and that conforms to his values.

I think of Mother Theresa who went for decades with a desolate sense of God's absence. Nevertheless, Mother Theresa labored to reach out to the poorest of the poor, the sick and aged. The king may have seemed remote, but the kingdom was developing. You and I can expect the same in our own lives.

This parable teaches us, secondly, to think of all we have and all we are as God's property in our care rather than our own possession. The master in the story entrusts his property to be managed by the servants.

The story is told of Robert Lewis Stevenson, the famous author, coming upon a man beating his horse. Stevenson intervened, trying to save the animal. The man yelled at the author, "Get out of the way, this is my

horse." Stevenson replied, "It's God's horse, and I'm here to protect it."

Can you see the difference in your own attitude towards things you own and things you borrow from others? One big difference is that everything we have to manage carries a responsibility. If you have your company's pickup truck, it is a sure thing that you have work to do with that vehicle. The only reason your boss gave you the keys was so you could do something productive. Things you own don't carry that expectation. You can let your own pickup truck sit idle for months.

Now, imagine that everything you own and everything you are belongs to God. Think of your life and possessions as God-issued. The only reason you possess anything, be it a home or a stock portfolio or a college education or a beautiful face, or a gift for playing the bassoon, is for the sake of God and God's coming Kingdom.

Put differently, everything you and I have carries a calling. If you are wealthy, there is a kingdom responsibility in that endowment. If you can teach or organize, there is a calling from God involved. This is why Jesus said to whom much is given, much is required. We're stewards, not owners.

Thirdly, this parable teaches us the role of risk-taking in your and my work of the kingdom.

I can't talk about risk without sharing with you Frederick Buechner's take on this parable:

The five talent man puts...p. 64

Not only is there a calling in all that God entrusts to us, but God expects us not to play life too safely. I've spoken before about George Mueller, the 19<sup>th</sup> century's greatest man of prayer. Mueller's great life achievement was the establishment of a great orphanage complex in Bristol, England. What makes this feat remarkable is that when God put it into Mueller's heart to build these orphanages, he had only 2 shillings (approx. .50) in his pocket.

The little saying applies perfectly here "Expect great things from God, attempt great things for god." Am I , are you out there with projects and work that has some risk? I'm not just talking about financial risks. Every time we say, "we're sorry," or share what Jesus has meant for us, or really tried to assist someone in trouble or said an honest prayer, or even listened carefully, we take a chance. Even to love is to risk. We may be hurt or let down.

So our story today is giving strong clues on kingdom behavior. Go for it.

The parable ends with the reckoning upon the master's return. To the servants who put their talents and treasure on the line was given even greater resources and treasure. This final reckoning in our parable also reveals another powerful principle. The servant who was afraid and who sat on his single talent has taken a fundamentally different approach to his life. He is thinking merely about himself, specifically his own security. Have you ever known someone whose entire approach to faith—to life—is to not do anything wrong? That's this man.

Listen again to the master's response to the one talent man who has only preserved what he was given: "You wicked and slothful servant...be cast into the outer darkness where men will weep and gnash their teeth."

For me, this brings out a fundamental principle in our faith. You and I are not the point. As long as we see the kingdom to be all about my righteousness, my well-being, my security, my possessions, and so on, we miss the essential character of discipleship. What did Jesus say about his own ministry: "I came to serve, not to be served." Or as someone strikingly put it, the church is the only

institution known to humanity devoted entirely to people who are not its members.

What to tonic all of this is in a nervous time when its difficult to keep our eyes off the status of the stock market and when we're wondering about the future and our security.

As disciples of Jesus Christ and citizens of his kingdom, we're given what we need, not for ourselves, but for the world God loves. Once again, these words loom up and give us fresh perspective. "Given by God, owned by God, to be used for the purposes of God."

Now that's real abundance—Kingdom style!