

Creekside Community Church: "Imitating Jesus"
"Loving God like Jesus Loves God II" Loving God with Our Talents
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This month as we continue to talk about Imitating Jesus, we're focusing on loving God like Jesus loves God and what real commitment to God looks like. And what we'll see is that the degree that we love God will be reflected in how we use our time, our talent, our treasure and our thoughts. Last week, we talked about loving God with our time. How I spend my time is the most accurate indicator of what I truly love. I can say I love God but if I don't spend time with Him or make time to serve Him, I'm only fooling myself. This week I want to talk about loving God with our talents; using everything He has given to us in the pursuit of His interests; which is the point of a parable Jesus tells in Matthew 25:14-30. Jesus is preparing His disciples for the time between His departure and His return to earth; the time in which we are living. So this is a parable about us. *"For it is just like a man about to go on a journey, who called his own slaves and entrusted his possessions to them. To one he gave five talents, to another, two, and to another, one, each according to his own ability; and he went on his journey. Immediately the one who had received the five talents went and traded with them, and gained five more talents. In the same manner the one who had received the two talents gained two more. But he who received the one talent went away, and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money. Now after a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. The one who had received the five talents came up and brought five more talents, saying, 'Master, you entrusted five talents to me. See, I have gained five more talents.' His master said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful slave. You were faithful with a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.' Also the one who had received the two talents came up and said, 'Master, you entrusted two talents to me. See, I have gained two more talents.' His master said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful slave. You were faithful with a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.' And the one also who had received the one talent came up and said, 'Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow and gathering where you scattered no seed. And I was afraid, and went away and hid your talent in the ground. See, you have what is yours.' But his master answered and said to him, 'You wicked, lazy slave, you knew that I reap where I did not sow and gather where I scattered no seed. Then you ought to have put my money in the bank, and on my arrival I would have received my money back with interest. Therefore take away the talent from him, and give it to the one who has the ten talents.' For to everyone who has, more shall be given, and he will have an abundance; but from the one who does not have, even what he does have shall be taken away. Throw out the worthless slave into the outer darkness; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."* The parable is pretty straightforward. A man is leaving on a long journey so he turns over his business to his servants, entrusting a certain amount of capital to each according to his ability. Two of the servants immediately invest and double what their master entrusted to them. One servant does nothing, hiding the money he was entrusted to manage in the ground. He doesn't lose it, he doesn't abuse it - he just doesn't use it. When the master returns, he settles accounts with his servants, rewarding the two who were faithful and punishing the one who was not. Now what are we supposed to learn from this parable and what does it say about how we love God? This morning I want to ask three questions: 1. What do the talents represent? 2. What is the master's business? 3. What is the slave's responsibility?

What do the talents represent? A talent was a unit of measurement for silver or gold - around 130 lbs. One talent of silver in New Testament times, for example was worth about 20 years of the average worker's annual income, so this businessman entrusts each servant with a significant amount of capital. Notice that Jesus says the master *"entrusted his possessions to them."* The talents never belong to the servants, they belong to their master. So what do the talents represent? They represent everything we have received from God. Proverbs 16:4 tells us, *"The Lord has made everything for His purpose, even the wicked for the day of evil."* Does everything include you? God made you for His purpose. And He made you the unique way He made you for His purpose. Look at what Paul writes in Eph. 2:10; *"For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them."* God made us for a purpose, for good works which He prepared for us. And so everything we are and have is from God, including our unique personality, our natural strengths and weaknesses, our skills, our aptitudes, our passions, both our natural and our spiritual gifts as well as the opportunities God gives us to use these talents. All that we have and all that we are has been entrusted to us by

God to use for His purpose. So if I love God I will employ everything He has entrusted to me in the pursuit of His interests.

However, if I don't know what He's entrusted to me, I won't be able to use it. I meet so many Christians who are still waiting for God to tell them what He wants them to do - waiting for that burning bush moment when all is revealed. "Here is My plan for your life." But in their search to find God's calling, they ignore what He has given to them and the way He has made them. So here are four questions to ask to determine what God has entrusted to you. First, God has made me for His purpose; what kind of personality has He given to me? Am I an extrovert or an introvert? Am I energized by being around people or by being alone? Am I more comfortable leading or following? Do I like new ideas or do I prefer to stick to the tried and true? Do I think out loud or process stuff in my head? Am I public with my feelings or private? Do I talk more than I listen or listen more than I talk? Do I make decisions quickly or do I take my time? Do I prefer a fast or a slower pace? Am I logical or emotional? Do I prefer to be truthful or tactful? Am I critical and quick to see flaws or do I like to please people and show appreciation? Do I feel more comfortable once a decision is made or do I like to keep my options open? Do I naturally gravitate toward the big picture or toward the details? Am I motivated more by achievement or by appreciation? Do I set goals and work toward them or change goals as circumstances change? Do I like finishing a job more than starting or starting a job more than finishing? The more you understand the unique personality God gave you when He made you, the more wisely you can invest yourself in serving Him because you'll see more clearly which opportunities fit the way He made you and which do not. I never intended to be a pastor. I loved the freedom from structure and the independence I had when I worked for Campus Crusade for Christ at Cal and the challenge to solve problems and to create something new. But I felt boxed in when I later worked at First Covenant Church at Oakland. Like most, well-established churches, there were carefully thought out procedures and policies and boards whose approval you needed. People weren't interested in developing something new that had never been done before but in maintaining what had already been created. Stability and tradition were valued. And that was exactly right for that church. But I went from driving a speed boat at Cal to trying to steer a battleship at First Covenant. I loved the church, the people and the staff but I knew myself well enough to know that this wasn't a good fit for me for the long haul. Then I took a class in church planting and to my surprise, I began to hear pastors who were like me; more entrepreneurial-outside the box-problem-solving- risk-taking-let's-give-it-a-try-and-see-if-it-works-even-though-nobody-else-is-doing-it-guys. And for the first time, I begin to think, maybe I could be a pastor. Maybe God is leading me to plant a church. It certainly fit the way God had made me. So ask yourself, what kind of personality has God given me? God will most likely use you in a way that's consistent with the way He's made you.

Second, ask yourself, "If God made me the way I am for His purpose, what are my interests?" When I worked at Cal, there was a guy on my staff who loved chemistry. He relaxed at night by reading his old chemistry text books. One day I asked him, "Mark, God hasn't taken away your interest in chemistry. Maybe that's what you should be doing." He replied, "But if I'm completely committed to Christ, doesn't that mean I should be serving Him full time?" I said, "Mark, you'll be serving Him full time no matter what you're doing. You'll be winning people to Christ and helping them to grow in their faith. The only question is, where? If God has given you such a delight in chemistry, maybe that's where He wants you." He and his wife left Crusade staff, he got his Ph.D and now serves Christ as a secular university chemistry professor and department head. Normally, the more we do what we enjoy most, the more effective we are. Anybody remember a woman named Dorcas in the book of Acts? She had a ministry as a seamstress. Sewing was what she was good at and she used that skill to serve the cause of Christ. So ask yourself, what are my interests? Because God can use just about any interest in the furtherance of the gospel. There was a couple who loved to give parties, the more creative the better. And they used those parties to build friendship with people with whom they shared the gospel. Don't dismiss your natural interests. They are talents God has entrusted to you to build a bridge to folks who need Christ.

Third, ask yourself, "If God made me the way I am for His purpose, what are my strengths? What am I good at?" I want to talk about spiritual gifts for a moment. 1 Peter 4:10-11 *"As each one has received a special gift, (who has received this gift? Each of us) employ it in serving one another as good stewards of the manifold grace of God. Whoever speaks, is to do so as one who is speaking the utterances of God; whoever serves is to do so as one who is serving by the strength which God supplies; so that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom*

belongs the glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen." A spiritual gift is the unique way the Spirit of God works through each of us for the benefit of others; and Peter divides spiritual gifts into two categories; speaking gifts and serving gifts. According the Bible, the speaking gifts include prophecy, the God-given ability to proclaim God's truth with power and clarity at the right time and in the right situation and in the right way; teaching, the God-given ability to explain and to apply the Bible: exhortation, the God-given ability to speak words of comfort, consolation, encouragement and counsel to people so that they feel helped, strengthened and healed; and evangelism, the God-given ability to explain the gospel to non-believers in a compelling way so that they believe. The serving gifts include hospitality, the God-given ability to provide food, shelter and care for new or needy people; leadership, the God-given ability to attract, lead, and motivate people to accomplish the work of ministry; mercy, the God-given ability to minister cheerfully and appropriately to suffering people; shepherding or pastoring, the God-given ability to lead, care for and nurture Christians in their spiritual growth; administration, the God-given ability to understand what makes an organization function, and to create plans and systems to enable people to do their jobs more effectively and joyfully, giving, the God-given ability to make and to contribute money and material resources to the work of the Lord with cheerfulness and liberality; and helps, the God-given ability to perform physical tasks for spiritual purposes. There are other gifts the New Testament lists as well but what I hope you can see is that God doesn't work the same way through each person. He works in a variety of ways. Suppose one of the members of your small group brought a homeless guy he met to the group. As you get to know him, you discover that he's a believer who's had a run of tough luck. Fred who has the gift of administration immediately starts organizing. "Bill, why don't you call George on the Benevolence Board. Nancy, could you call Family Services. Karen, see if there is a staff person around who might be able to help." Bill, who has the gift of mercy says to the homeless guy, "Don't be embarrassed. We all run into difficult times. I'm sure something can be done. Let's see what we can do." Karen who has the gift of prophecy and can't help herself interjects, "You need to exercise more discipline and obedience to the Word in the area of your finances. You need to plan a reserve fund for these kinds of things." Charlotte who has the gift of hospitality says, "Let me get you a chair. Would you like some coffee? We've also got some fresh fruit, if you'd like some." George who has the gift of helps immediately brings the chair and the coffee. Lynn who has the gift of teaching asks, "How did you get into this situation? Has it happened before? What have you learned?" Mark who has the gift of exhortation, says, "Do you know how much you matter to God? You are very important to Him and to us. He wants you to trust Him with this need because He cares for you a great deal!" Ellen who has the gift of giving opens her wallet to give him some cash. And Jeff who has the gift of shepherding asks, "What shape is your family in? How's your health? What can we do to help in an on-going way?" Everybody approaches the same problem in a different way because they have different gifts. The clearer you are on what your gifts are, the better you can invest those gifts in the work of the Master. We have a gift assessment that will help you to identify your spiritual gifts and if you drop me a note or email me, I'll get it to you. But realistically, the only way you can discover the ways God has gifted you is to begin serving. As you do, you'll discover there are some things you do well and really enjoy, some things you don't do well but really enjoy anyway, some things you do well but don't particularly enjoy and some things you don't do well and don't enjoy at all. In New Testament Greek, the word for joy and for gift is the same - charis. And so some people say your gift is what you do with the maximum of joy and the maximum of impact.

Fourth, ask yourself, "If God has made me the way I am for His purpose, what opportunities has God given to me? Last week we learned that Jesus saw time not as measured in minutes and hours but in opportunities and 1 Cor. 3:5 says that opportunities come from God. *"What is Apollos? And what is Paul? Servants through whom you believed even as the Lord gave opportunity to each one."* God not only entrusts us with a personality, interests, abilities and strengths, He gives us the opportunity to use what He's entrusted. So we need to always be asking, "What opportunities has God given to me? Where are there needs I can meet? Where is there an open door for service? What people do I have access to now?" I find so many Christians waiting for years for God to open a door for them to serve Him or to reveal what He wants them to do - when they don't recognize the opportunity in front of them. As you probably know, serving the community is a priority for our church and there are many ways we do that now. But it wasn't that way when we began. A few years ago, we started asking, "How can we do in this community what Jesus would do if He were here?" We knew from Scripture that we were to love our neighbor as ourselves and from the parable of the Good Samaritan, that seemed to mean helping whomever God put in our path. But we had no idea of how to start, what our neighbors needed, or what to do. So we asked, "Is there anybody at Creekside involved in community service?" And there were. So we asked them, do you need any more

help? And they said, "Sure." And so, instead of recreating the wheel and figuring out how to do our own program, we just got involved in a few local programs which needed manpower. And that became our pattern. Most of the service we do is by partnering with other groups who have the expertise and the experience. We just supply the necessary volunteers. We didn't know what we were creating or what it would look like eventually. We just took the opportunities in front of us and one thing led to another. So ask yourself, what opportunities to serve God and others do I have right now?

Fridge: business cards. Jesus has entrusted His possessions to us. Everything we have and are come from Him. If we love Him, we'll use what we've been given in the pursuit of His interests which brings us to the second question about the parable of the talents. What is the master's business? All we know from the passage is that the servants traded with their master's talents to make more talents. They reproduce and multiply what their master entrusted to them. But what does that mean? How do we reproduce what God has entrusted to us? The Bible is very clear about the business God is in - the people business. Look at what Jesus says to His disciples when He - like the master in the parable - leaves on a long journey. In Matthew 28:18-20, just before He returns to heaven, Jesus commands His disciples, *"All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."* This scene parallels the first scene in the parable. The master is leaving and gives his servants their assignment. What's the assignment? Jesus commands His disciples to make more disciples. To teach others what He taught them. Disciple-making is the business God is in. That's the purpose of the church; not to build building or to hold worship services or to organize events although all those things might be helpful in making disciples. But the goal is changed lives; people who follow Jesus and as a result, become more and more like Him and do the things that He would do. So who makes disciples? Other disciples. Christ didn't appear to you one day and say, "Follow Me." He used other Christians to draw you to Himself. And when Christ comes into your life, you are not immediately a mature believer. You're a baby and you need help to grow. Where do you find that help? Other Christians. That's the way Jesus set it up. He works through His followers. To grow we need information, we need a relationship with someone who's a little further along that we can imitate and we need a community to grow in who will pay attention to our growth and challenge us, lead us, encourage us and correct us. That's the business God is in and the business He calls us to be involved in with Him and the good works He gave us the talents for. We can serve Christ in a variety of ways but whatever we're do, it should ultimately contribute to people coming to know Christ and growing in Him. When Jeff was at Biola, he attended a guys Bible study at the home of a middle-aged man named Roy. Roy is a single man and sells pumping equipment. Every Friday night he fixes dinner - mostly lots of meat, potatoes and ice cream - for a bunch of young high school and college guys. And then they just sit around, read long passages from the Bible and talk about them. Roy isn't a teacher or a preacher. He just loves kids. And there are young men in ministry all over the world today who came to know Christ and grew up in Him as a result of their relationship with Roy. If the Great Commission is the master's business, then when Jesus returns, He will not ask how regularly we attended church or if we've been decent moral people. He will ask, where are My disciples? Because that's the business He's in and the one assignment He gave us to complete before He returned. I think that's why in the parable, the servants reproduce what the master gave them. That's what making disciples is, reproducing what Christ has done in us in somebody else, taking someone as far as we've gone.

Last question. What are the servant's responsibilities? Simply to use what his master entrusted to him for his master's profit. Two servants immediately go to work. They invest what they received, risking losing the capital their master entrusted to them. The third servant plays it safe. He buries his talent. Which tells me we're either using or we're burying what God has entrusted to us. There's no reward without risk, no increase without investment. We cannot make disciples or fulfill the great commission by playing it safe. So how do we use the talents God has entrusted to us to make disciples? How did Jesus use all that God had entrusted to Him? God gave His Son the power to do miracles, to heal and to liberate. Jesus didn't use that power to advance Himself or for His own benefit, He used it for the benefit of others. He used it to connect with people, to bless people and to invite them to become His disciples. And that's why God has entrusted talents to us - for the benefit of others. We invest what God has given to us to connect with people who don't know Christ, to bless them and do them good and to invite them to follow Christ with us. Those who respond, we walk beside, teaching them to follow Jesus as we learn to follow Jesus. Disciple-making is a process which begins when a person is introduced to the Savior and continues as that person learns to follow Jesus and make other disciples. It is not something we do

alone but together. And everything God has given to us can be used to further His purpose in people's lives; our personality, our interests, our strengths and gifts and opportunities. According to Matthew 28, disciples make disciples. It's hard to disciple someone else if you haven't been discipled yourself. In the coming year, we've got some exciting plans for developing more of a culture of disciple-making at Creekside, equipping Christians to effectively disciple others and especially equipping parents to disciple their children. According to recent studies, 80% of the kids who are in church today won't be by the time they reach 30 years of age. We are failing to disciple our children and are losing an entire generation and it is imperative that we reverse this trend. We'll have some exciting things to share with you in this regard in a couple of months.

I'll close with this. Why did the one servant bury his talent instead of using his talent? I want you to notice how *he* explains it, "*And the one who had received the one talent came up and said, 'Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow and gathering where you scattered no seed. I was afraid, and went away and hid your talent in the ground. See, you have what is yours.'*" "I knew you to be a hard man." Do you think the servant loved his master? No, he was only interested in himself. That's why he was unwilling to risk anything to profit his master. That's why he played it safe. He just wouldn't do anything. That way he could return the money his master gave to Him. But playing it safe turned out to be the most dangerous thing he could do. Because his master wasn't a hard man at all. He says, "If you had just put my money in the bank, at least I would have the interest. But you did nothing." And if I hang back and don't invest the talent, the abilities and the opportunities God gives me because I'm afraid I may fail, I have failed far worse than if I take a risk and fall flat on my face. By the way, that's how you conquer the fear of failure. Redefine failure. Failure is not trying and failing. Failing is not trying. Now this parable looks like it's about salvation. Because the third servant not only loses his reward, he loses his talent and is cast into the outer darkness which is what Jesus called hell. But I thought we were saved by faith in Christ, not by whether or not we were faithful in using what God has entrusted in His service. Yet is that what this parable is teaching? All four of these parables end with people being sent into eternal punishment because of their failure to take advantage of the opportunities they were given; for neglecting to do what God gave them to do. And in each case, the reason they fail is unbelief. In the first parable, the evil servant doesn't believe his master is returning. In the second, half of the virgins don't believe they need to prepare to meet the bridegroom. In this parable, the servant doesn't know his master, thinking that he is cruel and demanding rather than a loving. In the fourth, the goats don't believe they need to love their neighbor as themselves. We're saved by faith in Christ alone. Jesus' point in each parable is that saving faith produces obedience. If I really believe that Jesus is coming back, I'll get ready. If I really believe that I will give an account of the way I used what He entrusted to me and if I really love Christ, I will use my talents in the pursuit of His interests. Only those who believe, obey. And only those who obey, believe. If upon reading this parable, you realize that living for Christ is something you don't even think about; that you've never considered that all you are and have is from God and is to be used in the pursuit of His interests; or that one day you will give an account to Him who bled and died for you on the cross; if your faith is out on the periphery of your life and is only used when you're sad or sick or in trouble but really doesn't affect the way you live; then you need to ask yourself, do I really have saving faith? You may have the faith that saves, it just needs to grow. You haven't used it for a while. So ask yourself, "What's one way this week I can step out on faith and obey Jesus by using what He's given me to bless someone and to bring them closer to Christ." You'll find your faith gets stronger each time you exercise it by obeying. Asking Christ to come into your life and to make you the person He wants you to be is another way to express your faith in Him. If you've never done that, I'm going to give you the opportunity right now.

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