

The Parable of the Bags of Gold

¹⁴“Again, it will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted his wealth to them. ¹⁵To one he gave five bags of gold, to another two bags, and to another one bag, each according to his ability. Then he went on his journey. ¹⁶The man who had received five bags of gold went at once and put his money to work and gained five bags more. ¹⁷So also, the one with two bags of gold gained two more. ¹⁸But the man who had received one bag went off, dug a hole in the ground and hid his master’s money.

¹⁹“After a long time the master of those servants returned and settled accounts with them. ²⁰The man who had received five bags of gold brought the other five. ‘Master,’ he said, ‘you entrusted me with five bags of gold. See, I have gained five more.’

²¹“His master replied, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master’s happiness!’

²²“The man with two bags of gold also came. ‘Master,’ he said, ‘you entrusted me with two bags of gold; see, I have gained two more.’

²³“His master replied, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master’s happiness!’

²⁴“Then the man who had received one bag of gold came. ‘Master,’ he said, ‘I knew that you are a hard man, harvesting where you have not sown and gathering where you have not scattered seed. ²⁵So I was afraid and went out and hid your gold in the ground. See, here is what belongs to you.’

²⁶“His master replied, ‘You wicked, lazy servant! So you knew that I harvest where I have not sown and gather where I have not scattered seed? ²⁷Well then, you should have put my money on deposit with the bankers, so that when I returned I would have received it back with interest.

²⁸““So take the bag of gold from him and give it to the one who has ten bags.²⁹ For whoever has will be given more, and they will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them. ³⁰And throw that worthless servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’

The parable above is a well-known example of Jesus' teachings on how to sow what God has given us and reap fruits from what we have been blessed with in our lives. This teaching applies to many things in our lives, but I want to take a look at how it matches up with our service in church as part of the worship team. How should we be using our own musical gifts in church and how does this parable give us guidance?

What have we been given?

The first thing you might note is that each servant has been given a different amount to look after. What's more interesting is *why* each person gets a different amount. In verse 15 we're told that the servants are given five, two and one bag "*each according to his ability*". Is there any condemnation that one servant seems to be trusted with more than the other two combined? No, not at all. It would seem that the master has looked at where each servant is at, what they are capable of, and what they can handle and then divided the gold out as he sees fit.

In the same way in our ministry, we find ourselves in a group of different people, with different abilities and different years of experience. When I first joined the worship group at the church I first grew up in, I was a terrified teenager that was barely keeping up with the chords. I played alongside more experienced players and got copies of the music in plenty of time to rehearse and prepare. These days I'm comfortable leading worship in front of a large congregation. Even though I'm the same person, when I started out, I was just about keeping on top of the little responsibility that I'd been given. I was given a tiny amount of gold to invest. Trying to grow, develop and work on my skills in those early days took everything I had. If someone had told me the first week I ever played at church that I would be leading worship that week, I'd have probably run away and joined a new church!

This is the same with all of our gifts. We shouldn't be concerned with what the other people in our team are doing. If someone is regularly leading worship whilst you only just joined the team a few months ago and you're still trying to learn new songs, that's fine. The person that you're comparing yourself to started exactly where you're at. There was once a time when they felt exactly the way that you do. In the same way if someone can sound engineer a service for 300 people by themselves and you're still trying to work out what half the buttons even do on the sound desk, don't worry. There was once a time when the person you're looking up to didn't even know how to turn on the sound desk, let alone use it! Concentrate on your own gifts and what God has blessed you with. Take some time, reflect on where you're at in your ministry and work out what exactly God has given you to invest. Don't get distracted by what others have, but take stock of your own abilities in order that you can work out the best way to invest them and reap a reward for God.

Be patient

A part of this parable that sometimes gets missed is in verse 19. We're told that the master returned "*after a long time*". Sometimes with our gifts we can get impatient, and even frustrated, when things don't happen on our own pre-conceived timeline. When we step into ministry it has to be for the long haul. I've definitely been guilty in the past of wanting to run before I could walk, but sometimes there is great learning and character development to be had in taking your time in service to the church. Don't be impatient but be faithful in your ministry. Turn up to practice, learn the songs, listen to your leaders, read your bible, regularly

talk to God, live a life that Christ called you to live and, above all, have patience. These are what will grow your talents and your ministry in the most complete way.

How do we invest?

So, if we now understand our gifting a bit better, it gets a little easier to grow what we have. What's the next thing that we notice about this parable? What does the master say in response to the returns that his servants have gotten for him? To the first servant who took the five bags and turned them into five more he says *"Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!"*. That sounds pretty good to me! Let's contrast to what he says to the servant that took the two bags and turned them into two more. To this servant he says *"Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!"*. Eagle eyed readers may have noticed that what the master says to each servant is the *same thing*. What does this reveal to us about God here?

What it reveals is, hopefully, something that we already know. Namely that God looks in favour on a person, not because of the raw abilities and talents that they have, but how they use them and the heart behind that service. Whilst the two servants may have been given two different amounts to invest, they both went about the task of investing their gold with the same attitude of enthusiasm and diligence. God does not look favourably on those that serve in ministry based on what their talents are; their raw musical skills in terms of our ministry. God looks at how we take what we've been given and try to develop it and use it in service. He examines our hearts and motivations. If we have a heart for serving the church through our gifts, no matter how small they may be, God will rejoice with us in our faithful service.

Warnings against laziness

If we've looked at the first two servants, let's now take a look at the last one. On a first reading, you could be forgiven for having some compassion on the third servant. He kind of seems like he felt a little trapped and decided to play it safe. After all he didn't lose the gold he was given! If you look a little closer though, things may not be quite as simple as when you first read them. When the master returns, what's the first thing that the servant says? He tells him *"I knew that you are a hard man, harvesting where you have not sown and gathering where you have not scattered seed"*. This is an interesting sentence because if you really think about it, it's only actually half true. We certainly know from Jesus' ministry that we are indeed called to sow where God has not sown. Jesus commissioned his followers at the end of Matthew to *"go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit"*. God definitely *does* want to harvest where he has not sown, and he has commissioned us to do the sowing. What the servant gets wrong, though, is the first part.

If you didn't know anything about the master, apart from how he treats the first two servants, would you really say he is a 'harsh man'? He rejoices with both servants equally based on their attitudes and effort, not how much money they made for him. That sounds like a pretty good boss to me! He also says to the last servant that even if he'd only put the deposit in the bank, he would have still gained a tiny bit more than he was given in the first

place. There was favour to be had from the master, even in the smallest of gains. The problem was that the servant didn't understand who his master *really* was and used excuses to try to cover up for his laziness. We need to not be like the third servant.

In our ministry we need to be investing what we've been given. That means trying to improve our musical skills. We live hectic and busy lives, but if we are to properly invest what we've been given, we should try to take even just a little time to grow the talents that we've been blessed with. It's good to think about our musical skills and what you're doing to bring them along. If you feel like you've not improved your gifts recently, try to find a little time to practice and improve your skills, knowing God will be looking favourably on you when you do.

We should also be investing in our spiritual lives. Real, effective worship ministry is built on dedicated followers of Jesus who have a deep spiritual relationship with God. We should be investing ourselves in the bible, in prayer, and in the Holy Spirit. The third servant didn't properly understand the character of his master or what he wanted from him. We need to try to get to grips with who God is, and what he wants from us if we want to be effective servants.

So, who keeps the profits?

When we grow our gifts, what happens to the proceeds? If we sow for God and reap a harvest, who gets to keep the profits? Let's look at what happens to the first servant. When the third servant is given his dressing down, the master then said, *"take the bag of gold from him and give it to the one who has ten bags"*. The first servant invested what he was given, made a profit for his master, but was then allowed to keep the profits and invest it further! The same happens in our ministry. If we work on our skills as musicians in worship ministry, we'll be given more responsibility and opportunities to grow even more.

Luke 16 tells us *"Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much"*. When you first join the worship team in a church, you'll start by coming to practices. If you work hard, you'll slowly learn the songs and how to work with others in the team. Eventually you might get asked to play on a Sunday service. If that goes well, you might get asked again in a few weeks. If that goes well, you'll probably find yourself on the rota and playing on a regular basis. You might get asked to lead part of the worship one week. You might end up leading worship for a whole service. You might even end up as a regular worship leader at your church.

This doesn't mean that this is the default path for people serving in music ministry in the church, but it does illustrate the kind of thing that Jesus is talking about here. When we work faithfully with the skills and responsibilities that God has blessed us with, we may find that God gives us more to look after in the future. We need to be shrewd investors, looking for the maximum way to grow what God has blessed us with and, when we reap a harvest, we need to remember that the harvest belongs to God.

In summary

God has blessed you with gifts. When we step into worship ministry in our churches, we use these gifts to bring glory to His name and lead the people in praise to our heavenly Father. If we want to have the maximum impact in our ministry, we need to be investing in our skills and growing what God has blessed us with, both in practical musicianship and spiritual maturity.