

“Great Expectations”

“*Expected to Spend*”

Matthew 25:14-30

<http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=188284001>

Picture a playground.

Either the kind you’re used to or the ones your kids or grandkids play on. You might picture monkey bars, a slide, a climbing wall, bridges, wood chips, swings – can you see it in your minds eye?

Well, David Rockwell, a New York City-based architect doesn’t like that playground you’re picturing right now. He realized this when he took his daughter to a playground near his house and he saw how static it was, and how children adapted their imaginations to fit the playground structure.

So, Rockwell created a new kind of jungle gym. He called it The Imagination Playground... in a box... that’s right, the playground is in a box – a mobile shipping container on wheels. Inside are dozens of loose parts: foam building blocks of various shapes and sizes, buckets, wheelbarrows, brooms and shovels.

Now take that box, open it up near a source of water (like a hose) and a bunch of sand and what do you think you’ve got? You have a fantasy world where kids build their own cities, houses, castles, spaceships, even sewer systems!

Just open that box in front of children, walk away, and they’ll unlock the potential of random pieces and supplies on their own. They don’t need instructions or adult chaperones. They’ll make something special out of that rubble.

A story was read earlier about three servants – actually calling them servants doesn’t describe these three men well. For the sermon’s sake, let’s call them business partners. And these business partners were brought before their master – but again let’s put it in our context and call him a CEO.

To the first business partner, he gave five talents (about 5 years worth of wages), the second received two talents (about 2 years worth of wages) and the third got his entire salary for that year handed to

him. And then, the text says, the boss went on a long journey.

There were no instructions, or chaperones to tell them what to do with the assets. It was like leaving an open box full of odds and ends with a group of wide-eyed children and no specific parameters. The CEO provided the capital and supplies but it was up to the business partners to figure out what to with them.

We aren’t told why the business partners received 5 talents, 2 talents, and 1 talent; we are just told that each one received according to his ability. You see, the boss knew each one of them. He had been watching them and was keenly aware of what each servant could do and couldn’t do. And so, he gave each one what he determined they could handle.

Apparently, the first partner was quite “talented.” Because he took those five talents – that five years worth of salary and he doubled it, bringing in an additional five talents for the absent CEO.

The second business partner also did pretty well with his two year salary – he hustled his way into a 2 talent profit.

And the third – well, he played it safe and conservative. The third business partner put it in a hole in the ground – the equivalent of putting it in an ancient safe box or stuffing it in a space beneath the mattress.

The CEO eventually returned to find his three business partners ready for his arrival – all three confident about how they’ve managed his resources.

The first reveals his five talent profit and the CEO smiles and commends him saying “Well done!” He calls him “good” and “faithful,” and then promotes him, giving him greater responsibilities and an invitation to sit at his table.

The second opens his portfolio and he boss cheers once again, celebrating his achievement just as heartily as he celebrated the profits of the first. “Way to go, business partner #2!” You get the same bonus the first one received.

And then the third business partner steps up saying, “Boss, I knew you were tough. I knew that you were a shrewd businessman who did whatever it took to get what you wanted. I was afraid I’d disappoint you. I was afraid you might get mad if I failed. So, I decided to hide it in the ground, so here you go; your assets were kept safe, untouched and unused.”

The business partners waits for a similar commendation, or at least a reward for keeping his CEO’s funds safe. Maybe not a “way to go!” but at least, “Good job,” or “Thanks partner!”

But there would be no celebration, no bonus or reward. The CEO’s face turns red and his eyes are kindled with rage; “You wicked and lazy partner! You did absolutely nothing with what you were given. You played it safe, refusing to even put it in a savings account!”

“Get out of my sight! And give me that money as well! The first partner deserves it more than you do.”

And then Jesus says,

“For all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away.”

And there’s a place for worthless business partners like the third one. It’s a place of darkness, “where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” In other words, they will be lost in their own regret, sobbing and mourning about the opportunities they squandered.

What is a Christian? Most people would say that being a Christian means subscribing to a set of beliefs. You believe in God. You believe in Jesus. You believe in the Holy Spirit. You believe in a higher power.

And belief is an intellectual idea that you support. And so therefore, you are a Christian. But that is not what the Bible teaches.

Christianity is belief in action.

In The Bible it says, “Faith without works is dead.” And then it says, “You believe in God, who cares, even the demons believe that!”

Marva Dawn points out that the word, “believe” comes from the Old English words which means “to belove.” So when someone says that someone believes in Jesus, it literally means they love Jesus. And love, my friends, is not an idea that you know in your mind. It’s a verb that’s proven by action.

Do you believe in Jesus? Do you “belove” Jesus?

If you say you believe in Christ, you must accompany it with action, or it is as meaningless as a husband who says he loves his wife but refuses to serve her or honor her. It is as useless as a friend who looks for ways to get out of helping another friend, or a business partner who holds on to his money and never uses it.

How many times have you said this, “It’s the thought that counts.” Really? No it doesn’t. The thought doesn’t do anything!

Here’s one that I’ve used before, “I was thinking about you last night.” That’s nice. Or how many times have we used prayer as a substitute for action? My hand would be right up there with yours.

Or how ‘bout this one? “I’ll be with you in spirit.” That means that you won’t be there!

Being a Christian means we won't be present in Spirit, it means that we will physically there; in the dark places, the tough places, the hard places.

Being a Christian means we won't just think about people or be a "prayer warrior." It means our prayers and our Christ-inspired thoughts will compel us to action.

And it also means that we will use what we have to bless and minister to others.

When it comes to financial management, times are changing. People are spending smart, saving more, holding on longer to what they have and are – in general – thriftier. This is a good thing.

But while being thriftier is a good financial discipline, it's a lousy spiritual discipline. ***Refusing to use who you are and what you have*** is toxic to the soul and will only lead to what Matthew calls "weeping and gnashing teeth" – which is a way of saying "regret and shame."

Each of us has been given gifts, talents and resources, but they don't belong to us. They belong to God.

We all have a skill or a talent – that could be welding or painting, writing or fixing, coaching or nurturing.

And we all have things; resources, finances, and assets. But these have not been given to us so that we could experience personal pleasure. We have not been blessed so that we can enjoy our blessings for ourselves.

Furthermore, we don't own these gifts. A Christian doesn't own anything. A Christian believes that God owns everything and that we are stewards of the resources we have been given. But this doesn't mean that we guard them like a soldier standing in front of the vault at Ft. Knox. Being a steward doesn't mean that we hoard what we've been given. God calls us to spend our resources with the

guidance of the Holy Spirit, not save them up for a rainy day.

We are supposed live lives that are characterized by our spending not our saving. That means these hands we have are ministry tools. These minds are complex calculators of the Gospel. The houses we live in are small churches where ministry takes place. The bank accounts are budgets for outreach. Our cars are emergency vehicles to help those in need.

And what we have should produce something. When we stand before Christ at the end of our God-given life, we should have something to show for. We should be able to demonstrate that we have used our talents well.

A writer that I strenuously disagree with is a pastor and author named, John Piper. I don't like his theological stances and I find his public comments to be ill-advised and occasionally repugnant.

But in spite of my distaste for his beliefs, I have to admit that he has written one of my favorite books. Actually, there's one section that makes the book worth reading – one paragraph.

"I will tell you what a tragedy is," he writes, "I will show you how to waste your life. Consider a story from the February 1998 edition of Reader's Digest, which tells about a couple who 'took early retirement from their jobs in the Northeast five years ago when he was 59 and she was 51. Now they live in Punta Gorda, Florida, where they cruise on their 30 foot trawler, play softball and collect shells.'"

"At first, when I read it I thought it might be a joke," he writes, "A spoof on the American Dream. But it wasn't. Tragically this was the dream: come to the end of your life – your one and only precious God-given life – and let the last great work of your life, before you give an account to your Creator, be this: playing softball and collecting shells.

Picture them before Christ at the great day of judgment: 'Look, Lord. See my shells.' That is a tragedy. And people today are spending billions of dollars to persuade you to embrace that tragic dream. Over against that, I put my protest: Don't buy it. Don't waste your life."

Don't waste your life.

Whatever talents we have been given, whatever resources we have been entrusted, whatever deck we have been dealt - don't be like the third business partner. **DON'T WASTE THE OPPORTUNITIES BEFORE YOU.**

DON'T WASTE THE TALENTS YOU HAVE BEEN ENTRUSTED.

DON'T WASTE THE RESOURCES YOU HAVE ENTRUSTED.

A quote often attributed to the great British politician, Edward Burke goes like this:

"The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good people to do nothing."

Isn't that precisely what is so tragic about what has transpired this past week at Penn State? Good people doing nothing? Good people with the power and the ability to do something but doing nothing. They were cast out, deemed as good-for-nothings because of their inactivity.

Don't we celebrate our Veterans this weekend because they have done something? In the face of great danger, they did something – they fought, they protected and they served. They did something.

I'm sure many of you are now convinced that I read nothing but children's books, and you would be almost right. Many of my illustrations have been children's books or stories... that will change as the boys get older.

But one of my favorite books is called "The Dot" by Peter K. Reynolds. It tells the story of Vashti who is a little girl who is convinced that she can't draw.

So, her art teacher tells her to make a mark on a white piece of paper, any kind of mark. So Vashti takes her pencil and makes a simple dot on that big piece of paper.

Her teacher looks at it and says, "Hmmm.... Sign it." So, Vashti signs it. And she suddenly feels compelled to make more dots. She begins drawing big dots, painting colorful dots, crafting dots with personality, sketching out dark dots. And Vashti signs each dot with great pride.

Towards the end of the book, a boy, who is an admirer of Vashti's work complains that he can't draw and that he wishes he could draw like Vashti.

Vashti tells him to make a mark – any mark. And so the boy makes a line and Vashti looks at it and says, "Hmmm... Sign it."

What Vashti and that little boy came to understand is what many of us struggle to understand. Anyone can be an artist – but you've got to do something.

The message of the parable of the talents is that we are to be people of action who are unafraid to use what we have been entrusted to make our marks in this world. We have been called to "spend" our talents not hoard them. God is calling us to take an inventory about what we have – be it a little or a lot – and to use it and have something to show for the God-given lives we have.

LIFE APPLICATION QUESTIONS

For Sunday, November 13, 2011's Sermon

Foundational Scripture: Matthew 25:14-30

<http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=188284001>

Featured Scripture Reflection: "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!'" – **Matthew 25:21** <http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=188284058>

Opening Questions: What is your greatest accomplishment? What is something you have been unable to finish?

Scripture Questions

What is the scripture saying?

- Read **Matthew 7:17-23**. <http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=188284092> What stands out to you about this passage? What questions do you have? What do you like about this passage? What do you not like?
- Read **Matthew 25:14-30**. <http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=188284117> What words or phrases stand out to you when you read this passage? How does this passage compliment the previous passage?
- Read **James 2:18-19, 24-26**. <http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=188284147> Think about what you've just read. How does it relate to the previous passages?

How is God speaking through Scripture?

- What is the "Good News" in these passages of Scripture?
- After discussing and pondering these passages, how do these passages affect me?

God's word

- What is God's invitation to you?

A prayer

God, you have given us so much. Now, give us the courage to use the gifts you have given us. Amen.