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"To Each According to his Several Ability."

BY THE REV. JOHN REID, M.A.

A CAREFUL study of the Parable of the Talents (Matt. xxv. 14-30) leads to the conclusion that it is not to be interpreted generally, on merely moral lines, as if it illustrated the principle that men are responsible for the use they make of the powers which they possess. That is true, but it is not the truth which is taught here.

It is a parable of the kingdom of God. The Master calls "His own servants" and delivers to them "His goods." The distribution is made "to each according to his several ability." The "several ability" evidently stands for the natural gifts and capacities of the servants. What the Master gives is something different. It is described as "His goods," and may be taken as indicating the spiritual endowments which the Master, Christ, bestows on His servants for the life and service of the kingdom.

I. But assuming this, we are struck with the apparent incongruity that the distribution of these spiritual gifts, is determined by the natural ability of the servants; that the natural appears to be the measure of the spiritual, and the distinctions which exist in the order of nature seem to be repeated in the order of grace. In one view this arrangement is reasonable, and even merciful. It teaches us that there is no waste in the kingdom of God, that spiritual gifts are only bestowed where they can be used. The distribution is carefully adapted to the "several ability," and men are responsible for what they can use, and no more. But these considerations do not remove the incongruity of which we are conscious, when we regard the parable as teaching that ability in the order of nature, determines the measure of the gifts of the Master in the order of grace. It contradicts the principle that spiritual gifts are bestowed "according to His own will." It assumes that men are ranged in the kingdom of God as they are ranged in the world, which is contrary to fact, and that the inequalities of life, which are the sorest of human

perplexities, are continued in the life of the spirit and the service of Christ. The teaching of Christ throughout the Gospels has led to other conclusions. He constantly contrasts the life of the world with the life of the kingdom, and says, “It shall not be so among you.” We know also that “God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise, and weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty—that no flesh should glory in His presence.” Besides, in the parable itself there is an indication that spiritual gifts are not absolutely determined by natural ability. The servant who rightly used the five talents to which his ability entitled him gained other five, and received in addition the talent of the wicked and slothful servant.

2. These facts lead us to look at the teaching of the parable from another angle, from which it will be seen to be in harmony with the general teaching of Jesus. The words “to each according to his several ability” are full of significance. On the surface they show that the number of talents which each servant received at the beginning, is determined by his individual ability. But that does not exhaust their significance. The talents are given, not only in proportion to the ability, *but because of it*. The Master had carefully examined each of the servants separately, to see what ability was in him. The measure of capacity had been noted with precision. One stood for five, another for two, another for one. It is as if every atom of ability had been included in the estimate. The gifts of the Master’s “goods” were bestowed on account of the ability, that it might be used to the full. The servant who can use five talents is not entrusted with two, nor is he who can use two entrusted with one. The ability is such a precious thing that no part of it is neglected. The talents of the Master are intended to employ the abilities of the servants, and it is by their conjunction in faithful service that the other talents are gained.

3. May we not say that what is taught in the parable is the spiritualizing of the whole nature and conditions of life of the

Christian man? Men differ in natural qualities and conditions—one is richer, another is poorer, in the natural qualities of power; one has five measures of ability, another two, another one. Jesus recognizes this universal fact. But He wants the utmost from each; He demands the whole of life. He sees the possibilities which are hidden in every life, and bestows the talents of grace accordingly. The capacity of the natural life is the measure of the need of grace in the life of the kingdom. It indicates not only what it can receive, but what it requires, before it can be used to the full. The Master seems to say to every one, "My grace is sufficient for thee." So the parable teaches how Christ gives power to spiritualize the natural, to sanctify the ordinary, to transform the capacities and conditions of each Christian life into forces of character and service. The "several ability" is the measure of spiritual possibility, and the talents of grace, which each requires to make the possibility an attainment, are provided. There is no place for envying the good estate or endowment of any other, or for thinking that if we had their advantages we would be stronger or better. If the need or power differs, so does the grace. Christ gives to each servant what each can use, or what each requires. The possibility of each receiving His reward and commendation is open alike to every one.

4. The results in the lives of the servants are in harmony with this method of interpretation. They whose ability entitled them to receive five and two talents, gain in addition the same number of talents respectively. He who received one talent and hid it in the earth, gains nothing, but suffers loss. The talent of the Master's "goods" is taken from him, and he is cast out into the outer darkness. In the case of the faithful servants, the natural ability has been transmuted into a spiritual property; it can now be measured in the talents of the Master's goods; that which was natural has now become spiritual. Each of the faithful servants has doubled his value by using aright the talents he had received. So we may say that conversion is a process, and it is not completed till every element of natural

capacity is spiritualized. Even those gifts or powers of nature or condition which had been used in opposition to the will of Christ can be transformed into forces which He can employ. He “beats swords into ploughshares and spears into pruning-hooks.” The qualities which made St. Paul so bitter and strong as a persecutor, are transmuted under the influence of the talents of grace which were bestowed upon him, into the powers which made him the great Apostle, the persuasive and unwearied preacher of the faith he had persecuted. The imaginative faculty which made John Bunyan fearful in profanity, was changed by the talents of spiritual endowment into the power which pictured the loveliness of the Land of Beulah and the joys of the Delectable Mountains. It is here that we see not only the triumphs, but the tragedies of the Christian life. In how many cases are the “abilities” unspiritualized! How true it is that

“Other lives are hid in ours,
The lives that might have been.”

The unfaithful servant never used his talent. He “received the grace of God in vain.” He had as much of the Master’s “goods” as he required to make his “ability” a spiritual property; but, burying it in the earth—keeping it as a thing apart—he is judged as “wicked and slothful,” and cast as an unspiritualized being into the outer darkness “prepared for the devil and his angels,” and the talent which he did not use, is given to the man who had proved his worthiness to be entrusted with it.

5. May we not also say that the “several ability” of the servants indicates the line in which each one may best serve the Master? “Grace does not destroy nature, but perfects it” (Aquinas). Powers that are native to the soul are not to be crushed or neglected; they are to be consecrated to new ends and inspired by new motives. The gift of song which may have been used in lightness or frivolity is not to be silenced when its possessor becomes a Christian. The Master takes note of the ability, and gives the talent of grace which trans-

forms it into a power to lift the souls of men to the gates of heaven. The gift is an indication that the singer is to serve Him with it. The sensitive soul which suffers so acutely from the stings and arrows of real or fancied injuries may be touched to a finer issue, and qualify its possessor to become a son or daughter of consolation. Lady Burdett-Coutts, whose body was laid to rest a few months ago in Westminster Abbey, gave to the rich an illustration of how her gift had shown her the way of service. Conversion does not always mean that the man who has been turned is to become a preacher. In most cases he must "abide in the calling" wherein he was called. The shoemaker, when he yields to Christ, may become a missionary, as Carey did, but most likely he will serve Him best by continuing to make shoes, only making them well, and for His glory. The world does not need more preachers—at least, not the world at home. What is urgently required is an increase in the number of men and women who will use the "goods" of the Master, and serve Him in the common ways of life, "each according to his several ability."

6. The equality of reward and commendation in the case of the faithful servants harmonizes with this method of interpretation. The highest result in the kingdom of God is character. It is personality which is the mightiest force of the world. A Christianized personality is the result when the whole "ability" is spiritualized. The product is the same whether the man's measure is five or two. A circle is as perfect and complete though its diameter is measured in feet or inches, and the power which drew the smaller is equal to the power that drew the larger. The "new man" is the same in essential qualities whatever be the measure of his personality. Therefore the reward is the same: "Well done, good and faithful servant, enter thou into the joy of thy Lord."

