

THE USE AND ABUSE OF TALENTS.

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"Unto every one that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundance; but from him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath."—Matthew xxv. 29.

This is the conclusion and the application of the parable of the "Talent." One common use of this word talent shows the deep impression which the Bible has made upon our English thought and tongue. The word is Greek, and meant at first a balance, or a pair of scales; then a weight, and finally, as the precious metals were the most valuable objects weighed, the word became attached to them, and expressed a definite amount of gold or silver. Money was everywhere weighed before it was coined. Pictures of the process are found upon the monuments of ancient Egypt and Assyria. There the metal is represented not in the natural state, as dust or nuggets, but as molten into rings for more convenient carrying and keeping. Frequent reference to this custom is made in the Old Testament, as when Abraham weighs to the Sons of Heith the price he pays for his burying place in the cave of Machpelah; and when Joseph's brethren go up from Egypt with their corn they find their money returned to them "full weight in their sacks' mouths."

It is probable that coined money is not mentioned in the Bible before the close of the captivity in Babylon. If this be so, it gives new force to some proverbs of Solomon, e.g., "A false balance is abomination to the Lord, but a just weight is His delight;" and again "A just weight and balance are the Lord's, all the weights of the bag are his work." Such passages would then refer to the false weighing, not merely of things purchased, but of the purchasing medium itself, which would exactly correspond to the debasing or false reckoning of money in our day; the trying to make one dollar fill the place of two, as the putting of a light coin in the stead of one of full honest weight. The wise man's words would therefore have a special interest in these times when an unredeemable paper currency and short silver dollars are so much in vogue.

But as to this word talent, we have altogether changed its meaning. From a weight or sum of money, it has come to signify any mental faculty or power, so that we speak of a person of great talent as of one as having numerous and various talents; so signifying, not that he is rich in gold but in gifts and graces of the mind.

This is our constant, ordinary meaning of the word, and it has grown out of this parable.

A single passage in Christ's teaching has been strong enough to grasp this word and make it new; to turn it up from a material or mercenary sense to an intellectual and we might almost say a spiritual one, for the further lesson is implied that all natural endowments, or as we now say talents, are a gift or trust from God, (Carlyle says they are a "loan and not a gift") of which He has made us stewards, and for which He will hold us to a sure and strict account.

The Gospel will yet revolutionize all speech! It will take our common words and fill them with a better thought and lift them up to worthier use. Instead of gold and silver, which perish though they be tried with fire, they will represent the abiding and eternal, the ever-living and increasing treasures of the heart and mind.

In the present case I feel inclined to give to this word its widest scope, letting it include all things that we possess and can employ; all faculties and energies of mind; all opportunities of usefulness; all advantages of growth; all moral lessons and impulses which we feel; the whole sum of our time and our position, these are our talents placed within our hands by God, to be improved by us and rendered up to Him at last.

The text applies to all these things the rule which it has so much helped to make familiar to our minds, namely: disuse diminishes, and exercise increases all our powers. "Unto every one that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundance; but from him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath," i.e., every one who diligently employs the gifts or talents, which he has, shall find them grow and strengthen,

till they are sufficient for his needs, and he shall be abundantly supplied, but whoever shall neglect his powers shall see them dwindle and decay until they disappear and are completely forever lost.

Let it be remarked at once that the contrast here set forth is not between the right and the wrong use of powers; it is rather between their use and their disuse.

The person whom this parable condemns is not one who like the unjust steward wastes his master's goods, nor like the prodigal son spends his portion in riotous living; he only *hides* his talent, buries it and suffers it to lie unused. This may seem at first a far less heinous course than one of actual wrong. Merely to do nothing, cannot be so bad as positively to do evil. Perhaps not in some respects, but in some others possibly it may be worse.

It is at any rate more dangerous, because it is more plausible and easily excused. Conscience would reproach a man for active sin, when it would not do so for simple sloth.

Open vice cannot be made to look like virtue, but idleness may take the name of moderation or humility. The man may say, I am not fitted for responsible and open work; spiritual interests are so vast and delicate, I dare not meddle with them; or, the care of my own soul is sufficient to occupy me wholly. Many persons in the early Church did refuse the charges to which they were called, on grounds like these, and fled into the deserts, and hid themselves as hermits, when they should have been working like salt and shining as the light among their fellow-men. A man will often feel at liberty to remain quiet and refrain from doing good, when he would not think of doing wrong. He will comfort himself and will even boast and pride himself that he is guilty of no overt crimes and has at least done nothing worse than not to speak and work in favour of the right. Such men should listen to the sharp teachings of James, that sensible and practical Apostle of the olden time, who says: "To him that knoweth to do good and doeth it not," (*mark that expression*) not to him that knoweth to do good and doeth evil, but "to him that knoweth to do good and doeth it not, to him it is a sin." How does that crisp sentence from those ancient hills of truth come upon us like a quickening Arctic wave, blowing not alone upon the poisoned, pestilential scenes of vice, but breathing too upon the stagnant regions of inactive goodness, impelling us to earnest, unceasing toil.

The men who correspond to the unfaithful servant of the parable are not the openly and boldly bad; not men doing all the evil that they can. They are quiet, reputable, moral men, only keeping silence when they ought to speak; simply not accomplishing the good they might.

Persons who are cherishing a Christian hope, but who never make it known, who feel the strivings of the Holy Spirit, but do not yield to its persuasive power, who have experienced the fresh kindlings of the Saviour's love, but will not give the fire air and vent, who have gifts—not very excellent or brilliant possibly—but yet competent to fit them for useful stations in the Church, and to enable them to do good for Christ, who fold their arms, and while the strife is waging between Christ and Satan for the kingdom of this world, do nothing to decide the fight. These are the men who wrap their talents up in napkins and hide them in the earth; who put their lighted candles under bushels instead of on the candlestick to give light to all that are within the house. They are doing, as I think, what Paul was thinking of when he besought the Thessalonians not to *quench the spirit*. What mathematician can compute the hidden and unsuspected and therefore the useless, unproductive wealth of grace which God has given to mankind? A recent historical event may serve as illustration of the case.

A few years since we saw France suddenly cast down from her high place and made to sue for peace. We heard the hard conditions which the conqueror imposed upon her, and we asked in wonder: Where can she find the money which she is compelled to pay? Besides the cost and waste of an exhausting war, Germany demanded an indemnity, a fine of five

milliards of francs, equal to £300,000,000 or \$1,000,000,000 of our money. It was truly said that the French banks and capitalists could not advance so great a sum. It was supposed that she must look to other countries and pledge her income for long years to foreign lenders. What was our astonishment to find the whole amount quickly taken up by her own citizens and to see the giant debt to Germany paid before the appointed time! How was it done? not chiefly by the rich from their known resources, but by the many poor, who at their country's urgent call brought forth their secret stores, the money they had laid aside in old teapots and stocking feet and hidden in dark corners of their houses. It was then discovered that almost every peasant of that thrifty race had something thus laid by and when these many treasures, each one small, but mighty in their mass, were poured together, that was enough and more, and the greatest deed in the history of finance was wrought! That great debt was paid with *hidden talents*, with money that was lying useless in French homes, and so it was found further that the payment did not impoverish or exhaust the nation; did not drain the country of its treasure and derange the course of trade. France did not seem to feel the burden and the world has been yet even more astonished to behold her steady progress and prosperity since then. She was obliged to pay that sum in gold, had she been forced to take it from the money then in use it would have stripped the realm of coin and left her only a poor paper currency for years to come. But she took it from her dormant stores, brought idle treasures into use, and so this strange result appears. France seemed *aw* richer for the money she had lost, and Germany the poorer for the treasure she had gained. So large a sum added suddenly to the amount in circulation in Germany has done, just what such a process always does. It has made money cheap, inflated prices, produced extravagance, and this has been followed by reaction and stagnation and distress. Germany has been suffering most keenly from hard times. It is there that we have heard most of strikes and business difficulties and crises in the Government, and assassins' bullets. France on the other hand has been quiet and prosperous in civil and in social things to a degree that has delighted and surprised the world. Her currency has not depreciated, her industries have not languished, her credit has not suffered. It is the marvel of the age! And this is all and only because the awful strain of her defeat wrung out from her the wealth which she had never shown and which she did not even know that she possessed before.

Behold in this occurrence a type of what Christ's kingdom might accomplish to discharge her debt of consecration to the Master and of mercy to his fallen world, if she too would bring forth her hidden talents and put them to their full and proper use. Not if her rich ones who are already in the work would still more lavishly expend their gifts, her scholars grow more wise, her preachers wax more eloquent, her princes be more liberal; not that, at least not that chiefly nor alone, but if her poor and lowly ones, the private men, the humble women, the very peasants of her membership would but draw out their stores from the deep recesses where they now lie hid.

If any Christian man and woman would but grasp this thought and would act upon it: "Every power I possess, and any gift of grace which I receive, are but so many loans entrusted to me by the Heavenly Father. He puts them in my hands that they may do most good to me and to my fellow-men. He says occupy until I come, and he will soon return and reckon with me for their use." If each one would say "I am but God's steward, I must work the work of Him that sent me while it is day, the night cometh when no man can work, Lord what wilt Thou have me to do?" If the obscure persons, those who have or who suppose they have, but one talent, would bring that to the money changers and set it into active use, why then the Church would find she had a new and unsuspected strength; she would at once surprise both herself and the world at large. She would find supplies for all her needs, and she would enter on an era