

2CH Sunday at 7.30

Saved to serve

Bob Smith

Julius Rosenwald, one time President of that huge American company *Sears Roebuck*, had a philosophy of life that said, "When life gives you a lemon, learn to make lemonade". There are many of us who feel that life has given us a lemon. We look at others who seem so confident and talented and wish we were the same. We feel insignificant in comparison. But nothing could be further from the truth. Jesus was quite definite in his teaching that each of us has been given by God our own unique package of abilities and opportunities which, if we recognise and use them, will enable us to live out our own unique calling.

The real successes in the life of faith are not those who are blessed with outstanding abilities, but those who recognise what God has given them, stop wishing for something else, and go on to use what they've been given to do what they've been called to do.

Jesus once likened God to a wealthy man who went on a journey after having entrusted his property to his three servants. To one he gave five thousand silver coins, to another two thousand and to the third one thousand; "*to each according to his ability*" is the way the Bible puts it. The key to this story has nothing to do with the different amounts each received. Rather, it is that the master expected each of them to use what they had been given to the best of their ability. Consequently he was just as pleased with the servant who doubled his two thousand to four thousand, as he was with the servant who doubled his five thousand to ten thousand. His problem was with the servant who just buried what he'd received and did nothing with it.

In translating this story into our life situation we see that those amounts of silver refer to those packages of abilities, gifts and opportunities that God has given to each of us. Though we are not equal in what we have received, we are required to be equal in the effort we expend in using them. And the only condemnation is for those who don't even try. Use it or lose it, that's one of the great principles of life. In the context of this parable it is interesting to note that it was the servant who received the smallest amount who was the one who failed to use what he had been given.

Could it be, I wonder, that Jesus was, even then, aware of our propensity to think poorly of ourselves and what we have to offer in comparison to others who are more noticeably talented; and our tendency to therefore hide ourselves away? That's the very attitude he was criticising. I'm sure Jesus would have agreed with Julius Rosenwald; "If you think life has given you a lemon, learn to make lemonade."

It reminds me of the little boy who called at a rich man's home and offered to sell some pictures for ten cents each. "What are you going to do with the money?" he was asked. "I'm raising a million dollars for earthquake relief," he answered. "A million dollars!" the man laughed. "Do you expect to raise it all by yourself?" "No," he replied, "my brother is helping me."

We can appreciate this boy's spirit, even if we do have questions about his arithmetic. But it wouldn't be the first time that one small endeavour so captured the attention of others that great things resulted. Every worthwhile human endeavour started with one person who had a dream of something better and used what they had to achieve it. God has called us into His Kingdom to serve Him through serving others. We are saved to serve. The Bible says "*We are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works which God prepared in advance for us to do.*" We were made to contribute, not just to consume. What matters is not how long we live, but how well we live; not the duration of our lives, but the donation in our lives.

God never calls us without equipping us. We are, each of us, born with a whole swag of abilities and potential. Added to that, the Bible tells us that through our spiritual re-birth, God gives us *“spiritual gifts”*; special abilities for building up his church and accomplishing his work in the world.

There are several places in the Bible where these gifts are mentioned and there are usually considered to be about nineteen of them, falling into three categories: those associated with teaching, preaching and proclamation; those associated with service and support; and those which may be described as ‘signifying’ gifts or gifts that are ‘signs’ to a materialistic world that the power of God is a reality. I don’t have time to get into detail on this today. What I do want to do is emphasise that each of us, who has been inwardly renewed by our faith in Jesus, has been given one or more of these spiritual gifts.

Furthermore, I want to emphasise that in God’s sight there is no status list whereby some people are considered to be superior to others because the gifts they have received are more noteworthy than others. We certainly have our status lists. We usually give far more prominence to those who gifted in the areas of up front leadership than we do to those who work quietly behind the scenes. However that’s not the way God sees it.

We all make our contribution and it is the sum total of all the contributions that builds God’s Kingdom. Like the story of the teenagers who turned up at an evangelistic meeting once and because the auditorium seemed full decided not to stay but to go to a movie. However, an un-named man, whom history has forgotten, acting as a volunteer usher, encouraged them to stay while he personally went through the auditorium looking for two adjoining seats. When he found them he took those young men to their seats and they stayed for the meeting. One of them, that night, committed his life to Christ. Do you know his name? It was Billy Graham; probably the greatest mass evangelist in history.

Now, when the final reckoning is done and the credits are given for all those hundreds of thousands who have found faith through the ministry of Billy Graham, who do you think will receive that promised word from God *“Well done, good and faithful servant.”* It won’t just be Billy. One un-named man who faithfully exercised his ministry of support will be there too; forgotten by the world but not forgotten by God.

Discovering our gifts and the opportunities for using them is one of the most liberating things in life. The outcome is an exhilarating sense of call that both energises us and fulfils our innermost desires. God intends that we should all find and fulfil our unique ministry. There should be no square pegs in round holes in God’s work.

The big question is, how do we discover what God is calling us to do? I remember visiting a little old lady in Washington DC, nearly twenty five years ago, who was considered to be something of an expert on this subject. Her name was Elizabeth O’Connor and she had written several best selling books on the subject of gifts and call. I asked her the question, how on earth do we know what we are meant to do? God doesn’t seem to send angels and visions to spell it out to us like in the Bible. I still remember her answer; *“Your call is written into your very being. It is what, in your heart of hearts, you would most want to be doing.”*

I remember my response too. I said, “It couldn’t be as simple as that. Surely there is at least an element of self denial and self sacrifice about it.” She just smiled and said, “I’ll leave you to think about it.” Well I have been thinking about it ever since, and the older I get the more I believe she was right. The more aware I am of my spiritual gifts and natural abilities, and the more I line them up with the opportunities I’ve been given to express them, the greater my sense of personal fulfilment is.

Bill Hybels talks about our call being the point where our abilities, our opportunities and our passion meet. I actually believe that the process of discovering our gifts and call is a lifelong journey in which new insights and opportunities are given to us as we respond faithfully to the ones we’ve already received. This is clear in Jesus’ parable of the talents. The reward for the servants who proved faithful in using the talents given to

them was that they were given even greater responsibilities. It is as we prove ourselves faithful in the small things that God entrusts us with greater things; and this is a process that will continue on into eternity. However, let me suggest three things that I believe help us in the process of discovering our gifts.

The first is to ask ourselves, *what does my heart tell me?* This is particularly important for those of us who tend to be intuitive. The second question is to ask ourselves, *what does my mind tell me?* It is important for us to look back over all the things we have done and identify the things that truly brought us a sense of joy and achievement. When we do something and feel energised by it we can be pretty sure that we have been working in the area of our gifts. The third question is to ask ourselves, *what do other people tell me?* We should always take heed of the potential objectivity of friends and counsellors, particularly those whom we recognise as people of insight and wisdom. Sometimes, their perspectives provide the final piece of the jigsaw that enables the complete picture to emerge. Then, having put all these pieces together the next step is to try it out.

The most important factor of all in this process of discovering our gifts and call is that of faithfulness. I Corinthians 4:2 tells us *"It is required of those who have been given a trust that they prove faithful."* What does that mean? It means that we don't give up; we keep on going. I read about a group of men who were asked to write down what they hoped people might say about them at their funerals. One said he hoped people would talk about how successful he had been in his career and what a contribution he had made to his profession. The second said he hoped people would talk about what a good family man he had been and how his children had loved him. The third said, *"Well I hope the thing they say about me at my funeral is; 'Look, he's moving.'"*

However, what I hope for is that God will say, *"Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a few things. I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your Lord."* And I hope that's what He'll say to you, too.

Father, help us not only to recognise what you have called us to do and the things you have given us to do it, but also to want to see it. Amen.