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**Sermon—19Nov17**  
**Mt. 25**  
**“Talent Search”**

*In the Name of God, Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier. Amen.*

When I first heard the parable that was read in today’s Gospel, it seemed to me to be unfair. I thought that the punishment that the third slave received was cruel.

After all, the slave returned to his master the money that he was given to look after. He kept the money safe—yet he is berated for not having increased the sum as the other two slaves did. The first two slaves doubled the money they received; the third slave returned the single talent to his master.

Now the master is so angry with this inferior result that he condemns the third slave to be “thrown into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

A “talent” was a considerable sum of money in ancient times. The value of a talent is debated by scholars, but one commentator speculates that it was the equivalent of what a day laborer would have earned if he worked *6,000 days*! In any case, it was a lot of money.

So, one would think that the third slave would get some credit for keeping the talent safe. He knew that his master was a hard man; wasn’t the slave smart to make sure that he didn’t lose the funds in his care? Yet because he failed to increase the money that he had been entrusted with, the slave suffered an extreme punishment.

Most scholars have explained this punishment by saying that the parable is about spiritual matters. It’s about how we are supposed to use *spiritual “capital.”*

From this perspective, the condemnation of the slave is justified. For you can’t just bury your soul in the ground. The only way to preserve spiritual capital is to try to make it bigger!

According to one old maxim: “Not to go forward in the spiritual life is to fall back.” You can’t just rest on past achievements. You need to make progress.

Take as an example, *relationships*. If the ties that bind a friendship or a romantic attachment together don’t become stronger with time, the relationship is likely to stagnate. People change, and if a relationship is going to keep up with those changes, it needs to develop as well.

After a couple marries, for instance, they may first focus on making money so that they can buy a home. Then, after a few years, when they have established themselves financially, they may decide to have children. When the children arrive, the couple’s desire to advance their careers may be surpassed by new wishes to spend time with their kids.

At our parish retreat this fall, we looked at the idea of a *rule of life*. A rule of life takes spiritual practices such as prayer and going to church and integrates them into the broader structure of your life. You might establish a rule, for example, that you will pray once a day, and that you’ll try to attend church most Sundays.

You may not always keep up with your spiritual goals. By the way, if you don’t succeed, you shouldn’t feel *guilty*, because failing to follow a rule of life isn’t a sin.

In fact, it might be the case that your failure to reach your spiritual target is a sign that you’ve set an impractical rule for yourself. The solution then is to make the rule easier. Or maybe you simply need to get used to the change in your routine that the rule requires.

“Not to go forward in the spiritual life is to fall back.” And because we need to progress, we may find it useful to try to figure out how well we are doing in working toward our goals. We need to ask what we value most. For instance, we can ask ourselves that old question, “What would you like to have written on your tombstone?”

That question is asked with the assumption that you *wouldn't* want an inscription like, “She was a workaholic.” Or the memorial, “He loved to shop.”

You would much prefer to be remembered for being treasured by your family, or as someone who was kind to her neighbors.

Looking at the talent pool of our parish as a whole, it's encouraging to see how various members of our parish have been challenged by our outreach programs. Among other things, they have advocated new procedures to identify and rescue victims of human traffickers. And they have helped homeless people who are trying to find their way to permanent housing.

I have often noticed that people involved in these efforts are pleasantly surprised to discover that they have been able to go *outside their comfort zones*. And that of course is what it means to use our talents in the first place. Going ahead in spiritual life, we are often led by the Holy Spirit beyond what's comfortable.

Another way to gauge your spiritual progress is to ask yourself, what do those who know you well think about you? What do they value in you?

Again, they may not particularly care whether you work long hours. They are much more likely to remember how you have been a good friend when they needed someone to stand by them. They may have remembered your patience in the face of adversity. Thinking of our strengths helps us find new ways to serve God.

And as we assess our spiritual gifts, we can remember that they differ from other kinds of talents. The fastest runner can only run so fast. The most brilliant mathematician can only solve so many problems.

By contrast, spiritual gifts have an almost *unlimited* potential. They're not infinite, of course; no human being can do an infinite amount of good.

But spiritual gifts are able to transcend the limitations we have in our bodies and minds. We can love, we can care, we can pray, we can do good.

Take as an example an elderly man I'll call Henry. I've known many Christians like him. Most days, Henry is confined by age and infirmity to his tiny apartment. His memory is failing; his sight and hearing aren't what they used to be.

Yet, despite his physical deterioration, Henry's spiritual gifts actually grow. When his friends visit, he is always cheerful. He accepts the confinement of his present existence.

For while there are many things that he can no longer do, he can still pray faithfully for other people who have problems. As he carefully follows the goings-on at his church, the man's heart is filled with gratitude for the life he is still able to live.

Our spiritual gifts aren't infinite, but they can surprise us. All the more reason to try to discover what they are!

*And now unto God the Father ... Amen.*