



BLESSED

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BLESSING

PARABLES FOR THE HOLIDAYS

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Talking Turkey

Thanksgiving is a beautiful tradition, the kickoff to the holiday season and a time of togetherness for family and friends. It is also a stinkin' lot of work, if you happen to be the person facilitating all this togetherness.

Whenever I speak at an event leading up to Thanksgiving, I ask the adults in the room how many of them think of the coming weeks and just feel tired? There are a million things to do — defrost the turkey, calculate how many pounds of cranberries and sweet potatoes you need, make sure your house is ready for the relatives, and figure out your battle plan for Black Friday, so you can get the maximum number of Christmas presents checked off your list for the minimum amount of money.

Our perspective on the holidays shifts as we get older. When you're a kid, the holidays are pure magic, nothing but lights and treats and grandmas and toys and Charlie Brown specials and meaningful traditions. But when you're an adult, you know that

creating that experience for yourself and others takes a lot of hard work, and even sacrifice.

While this may be a leap that only a theology nerd would make, this dynamic reminds me of Jesus's parables about the kingdom of God. They are all about preparation, and partnering with what God is already doing in the world.

If Jesus was telling the parables today, I think he might say something like "Again, the kingdom of God will be like two women preparing for Thanksgiving dinner. One clipped coupons, and bought her sweet potatoes before Super One sold out. But one forgot to thaw the turkey. And when the in-laws arrived, there was much weeping and gnashing of teeth."

See, God has accomplished the real work. Christmas happened. And the day we celebrate it is coming, whether we prepare for it or not. But how we live in the meantime matters, for ourselves and others.

And Christ will come again, whether we have prepared for him or not. And as followers of Christ, how we live in the meantime matters, for ourselves and others.

That's what the parables in Matthew 25, including the Parable of the Talents, are all about.

When Jesus was telling these parables, he was only a few days away from his crucifixion. He was preparing his followers for the fact that he was going to be leaving them in a short time, and that they would need to live faithfully, making the most of the time they had until his ultimate return.

And that's still what followers of Christ are called to do. We're supposed to live faithfully, in a way that helps to prepare the world for the second advent, the second coming of Christ.

Now, I'm going to ask another a really honest question. How many of you think about THIS, and just feel tired? Like there are a million good things we should be doing, but for some reason we don't do them? Or perhaps we get all disgruntled and holier-than-

thou, like the martyr mommy slaving away all by herself in the kitchen, or the elder brother in the Parable of the Prodigal Son, and do good things with a crummy attitude?

This is something we need to talk about.

Blessed to be a Blessing

Thanksgiving is a day set aside to remember all the ways that God has blessed us. But God hasn't just blessed us so we can sit around enjoying the fruits of his labor! No, God calls us to be like him, to imitate him. Which means that when God blesses us, we are expected to let those blessings flow through us and bless others.

We know that we're saved by grace, through faith, and not by works so that no one can boast. The Apostle Paul tells us that in Ephesians 2:8-9. There's nothing we can do to earn the gift God is offering us in Jesus--we simply accept it.

But in verse 10, Paul goes on to tell us us that we were *created* in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do. **So good works don't get us into heaven, but they're part of our purpose of being here on earth.**

See, in the very beginning, God created human beings to have a positive impact on the world around them by imitating their

Creator. That's part of what it means to bear God's image, as described in Genesis 1.

As Christians, this is also part of what it means to be conformed to the image of Christ, as we read about in Romans 8. We're supposed to be like Christ in this world, to be his body here on earth.

God has blessed us, and as God's image-bearers, we are called to bless others.

It's a beautiful system, really: God's Spirit filling us to overflowing, so it splashes out and floods the world around us.

But it doesn't always happen that way, does it? Sometimes, the good work God wants to do in and through us gets clogged up somehow, maybe between our head and our heart, or maybe between our heart and our hands.

In my discussions with people, I have come to believe that there are three common barriers that clog us up, preventing us

from passing the blessings God has poured out on us on to others.
Those barriers are selfishness, exhaustion, and insecurity.

The Revenge of the Shopaholic

Okay, let's be real. Sometimes, like the parables illustrate, we just don't *feel* like blessing others. We get lazy, or selfish, and decide to serve our own interests, instead of looking out for God's interests and the interests of others.

We make up excuses about why we don't really *need* to do the good we know we should do, or why the people God has put in our path don't really deserve our help. It's not about works, so it doesn't matter anyway, right? Well, it *isn't* about works, but when we're thinking and acting that way, our heart is in serious trouble!

It's ironic that Thanksgiving, a day when we're supposedly giving thanks for our blessings, is followed by Black Friday, the biggest shopping day of the year. I think this says something about where we are at as a society. Most Americans know that they have been incredibly blessed from a material standpoint, especially compared to the rest of the world. But we never actually feel content.

In fact, we're the opposite of content. We're frantic — so frantic that we're willing to line up in the freezing cold at four in the morning, waiting to storm Best Buy and get the biggest TV for the least amount of money.

Like junkies looking for our next fix, we buy into the lie that stuff will make us happy. Even though we know better, we keep feeding the beast, running up credit cards and filling our homes with clutter that we need to manage and maintain.

Meanwhile, while we're destroying ourselves with excess, many of our brothers and sisters around the world are going to bed hungry, suffering for lack of things we could provide, if we'd just give up a few doodads.

Instead of sharing our blessings with others, we hoard them. And like Ebenezer Scrooge, it doesn't make us any happier. In fact, it makes us miserable.

This is an especially uncomfortable thing to talk about in American society, because we tend to equate a person's worth

with their net worth. The fact that so much of our value is tied up in our money makes it harder for us to confer it on others. *I worked hard for this money! You have no right to ask me to share it, and the people who need it don't deserve it anyway, or else they would have plenty. Mine! Mine! Mine!*

It's so easy it is for us to find our identity, security, and worth in our material possessions, instead of in God.

But Jesus talks about this a lot in the gospels. How hard it is for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven! The more we have, the more we have to lose if we take Jesus' commands about caring for the least of these seriously.

Maybe this is something we need to think about this holiday season.

Just to clarify, there's nothing wrong with having nice things. And whatever you do, please don't tell your kids that you're not buying them presents this year, because Christmas has become a capitalistic sham and Jesus wouldn't approve. Bah humbug. If

you're going to go all Ebenezer Scrooge, don't throw Jesus under the bus!

But do think about ways you and your family could bless others this season, instead of just accumulating more stuff to clog up your closets.

Burned Out on People Pleasing

Sometimes, we just don't feel like we have anything *to* give. We're burned out and depleted from giving more than we had to give in the first place.

If that's the place you're in right now, I just want to encourage you. We are not religious robots. **God created us as human beings, with certain physical, mental, and emotional limitations, and he said that it was good!** Even Jesus didn't do everything. He took time to be alone with God, away from the demands of the world.

Oftentimes we get in trouble because we ignore the sabbath. God commanded that we stop and rest, trusting in God's love and sufficiency to do what our human efforts could never accomplish. The sabbath is a day to remember that it is God who saves, not us. And that's a good thing!

But instead, we listen to the world's demands, and try to win people's approval by doing good, spiritual things.

I mean, if I could be like Martha Stewart and Mother Theresa rolled into one, it might impress my friends. But it wouldn't impress God. Because really, God isn't calling me to be Martha Stewart or Mother Theresa. God is just calling me to be Jenny, with all my strengths and weaknesses, transformed by Christ.

God isn't disappointed if my house, my job, or my ministry isn't a showcase that makes people ooh and aah. That stuff has more to do with my own prideful expectations than with God's.

We tend to pay more attention to what other people think of us, or what we think of ourselves, that we do to what God says is true about us: that we're his beloved children, justified by Christ. And that's exhausting.

In Galatians, Paul is staging an intervention for Christians who are in this very situation. In chapter 1, verse 10 he asks *Am I now trying to win the approval of human beings, or of God? Or am I trying to please people? If I were still trying to please people, I would not be a servant of Christ.*

Some of us need slow down, and think about whose approval it is we are actually seeking. Some of us need to spend more time resting in God's incredible, unconditional love for us, allowing him to fill us back up. Because while God is limitless, we are not. And we really can't give what we haven't sat still long enough to receive.

Are you Living in Fear or Living in Love?

Perhaps the most pervasive reason well-intentioned people don't use the blessings God has given them to bless others is the one we see in the Parable of the Talents.

Sometimes, like the servant with one talent, we're so convinced that we are going to mess things up, and so insecure in the master's love for us, that instead of using the talent that he has invested in us, we bury it in the ground and pretend it isn't there.

Does this sound familiar to anyone?

Let's read about this. Matthew 24:24-25 says "*Then the man who had received one bag of gold came. 'Master,' he said, 'I knew that you are a hard man, harvesting where you have not sown and gathering where you have not scattered seed. So I was afraid and went out and hid your gold in the ground. See, here is what belongs to you.'*"

When I was younger, this confused me. The master was supposed to represent God, right? This "hard man" the servant was so terrified of didn't sound like the God I knew.

As I got older, I realized that parables weren't intended to be exact parallels. The parable of the shrewd manager, where the hero embezzles from his master, is a perfect example of this.

But another thing happened as I got older. I began to see myself in that insecure servant.

Growing up, I was pretty confident. I was surrounded by adults who loved me and believed in me, which was an amazing blessing. But I also absorbed some pretty high expectations. Some of those expectations were wonderful and helped me to grow, but others just discouraged me.

When I hit adulthood and all the challenges that came with it, my fear of failure skyrocketed. I began to pull back from new challenges, preferring safety and security to growth and development. I knew that God had given me gifts in certain areas,

but I was terrified to use them, terrified of messing up, terrified of what would happen if I tried and failed.

It wasn't until I hit my thirties that God began to drag me, kicking and screaming, out of my comfort zone. I literally started hyperventilating the first time I taught a Bible study, to an intimidating group of twelve or so friends.

I have other friends who have a similar problem for different reasons. They grew up in homes where they didn't feel loved and supported. Some of them were afraid of their earthly fathers, afraid of what he would do to them if they messed up, so they learned to make themselves as inconspicuous as possible.

They carry the shame and insults that were heaped on them as children around in their soul, and all too often, they believe those lies about their self-worth, or lack thereof.

Maybe they suspect that they have a gift in a certain area, that God has given them a talent, but they are too afraid to use it, sure

they are going to mess up and terrified of what will happen when they do.

Master, I knew that you are a hard man. So I was afraid.

Deep down inside, they feel *unworthy* to use the gifts God has given them. Who am I to sing, or speak, or serve, or give? People might think I'm showing off. They might accidentally think that I *like* myself.

Well, I'll tell you who you are. You are a beloved child of the king! You are a servant who the master has blessed with talents that he means for you to invest for the sake of the kingdom.

In 1 Corinthians 12, the apostle Paul talks about spiritual gifts. Verses 7 to 11 say *Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. To one there is given through the Spirit a message of wisdom, to another a message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by that one Spirit, to another miraculous powers, to another prophecy, to another distinguishing between spirits, to another speaking*

in different kinds of tongues, and to still another the interpretation of tongues. All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he distributes them to each one, just as he determines.

Now, let me ask you something. Do you think God knows what he is doing?

In the Parable of the Talents, the problem isn't that the servant is selfish. The problem isn't that the servant is incompetent. And you get the feeling that the servant truly wants to do the right thing by the master.

Do you know what the problem is? **The problem is that the servant doesn't trust the master's character.** He doesn't *really* believe that the master loves him, so he lives his whole life in fear.

What about you? Do you trust the master's character? Do you believe, deep down inside, that God loves you no matter what? That he is absolutely crazy in love with you, like a lovesick bridegroom waiting for his bride, or an adoring mother marveling over her child?

1 John 4:18 says *There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.*

God is saying, you don't get it! I love you, and you don't have to be afraid anymore. I took care of it all — all your guilt and shame, all your weakness and failure — I took it all on myself at the cross and got rid of it, forever. Don't pull away from me, don't hide in shame. Live in the freedom of my love!

That's my prayer for you this holiday season. That you will catch just the slightest glimpse of how much God loves you, and that it will transform you forever.

You know, we've been talking about being a blessing to others. But we can't bless others out of our spiritual poverty. We need to accept the blessing of God's inexplicable, unmerited love for us, instead of deeming ourselves unworthy and rejecting his lovingkindness, and all the good things God wants to do in and through us.

We need to allow God to fill us so full of himself that we are bursting at the seams with love, and mercy, and compassion, and power, so much so that it floods out to bless the world around us.

When that happens – when we truly realize how much God loves us, and let that love spill out onto others – we, and the world, will never be the same.

Hey, Check This Stuff Out!

Don't Hide Your Light under A Laundry Basket:

150 Bright Ideas for Wannabe World Changers

By Jenny Rae Armstrong

When your world is dominated by dirty diapers, the fair distribution of animal crackers, and nightly battles over proper dental hygiene, it's easy to feel as if your unique gifts and callings have been swept aside like those stale Cheerios collecting dust bunnies under the table. But it doesn't have to be that way. Written in a chatty, conversational tone, *Don't Hide Your Light* is a collection of fun-sized essays that can be read in five minutes or less, that inspire mamas with creative ideas on how they can impact their home, workplace, community, and world, even if they have a baby strapped to their chest and a toddler clinging to their knees.

Called Out!

By Jenny Rae Armstrong

Want an overview of what the Bible has to say about how God's male and female image bearers are called to work together to build up God's kingdom? This six-session curriculum was designed for teens, but adults love it too!

Busting the Motherhood Myth

By Jenny Rae Armstrong

"Godly womanhood isn't about being conformed to the image of the Proverbs 31 Woman. Godly womanhood is about being transformed in the image of Christ." Mother's Day is a wonderful opportunity to love on our moms, but it can also be a very painful holiday for those who don't have children, or who have a difficult relationship with their mother, or whose lives don't fit the fantasy mom trope the card companies peddle. This mini-book delves deep into the Bible, dismantling the myths that keep women enslaved to false expectations, and freeing them to focus on the one thing needful: being a disciple of Jesus.

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