

MATURE

Using God-Given Gifts & Resources



Welcome to our fourth set of weekly bible reading notes to accompany our MATURE series—and well done for getting this far.

Our aim with these notes is to encourage one another to read God's word, so you may want to commit with a friend to do these bible readings and to pray each day – and then ask each other how you've got on during the week.

This week we're going to look first at the gifts we have received and our motivation for service, before spending some time in Matthew 25 looking at the parable of the Talents. Finally, we'll think a little about using our financial resources from Acts 4:32-37.

These notes should hopefully be useful for individuals and for families with and without children. Each day, there is a bible passage to read – **read that first**, and **pray** – ask God to help you understand it. (If it is your habit to spend some time with the passage and make your own notes, then do that now.)

Once you've read the passage and thought about it – have a look at the accompanying notes. The notes cover some of the context of the passage, an explanation and an application. There are also some accompanying questions or suggestions for action. As God speaks to you through his word, you may wish to write down what he is calling you to do (and share it with someone!) However, don't worry if sometimes you don't receive an obvious answer to prayer or clear instruc-

tion – just keep faithfully reading God's word, and He will use it in your life, as the Holy Spirit works in you.

After you've looked at the bible passage is a good time to pray – pray for strength to do what you need to do – thank God for what you have learned about him – and bring your requests before him.

Then, you'll see that there is an activity for families with children; the target age range of these activities is 4-11ish, so you may need to modify them. This activity draws on one or two of the verses you've been reading, and give you some suggestions for sharing them with the family – over the breakfast or tea table perhaps. There's a starter activity to get people thinking, then reading the passage, some questions to answer, and then something to read – and a prayer so you don't forget to pray (just a starting point – do pray for longer if you can). Should take about five minutes – but can easily expand if you want it to.

Don't worry about communicating everything – particularly if you've got small children – communicating something of the good news of Jesus Christ every day is a great place to begin.

Enjoy – and let me know how you get on

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads 'James'.





Monday

Ephesians 2:4-10 The Greatest Gift

Read: Ephesians 2:4-10

We begin this week by reminding ourselves of the greatest gift we have received from God, the gift of salvation by grace alone.

Ephesians 2 reminds us that we were made alive in Christ, even when we were still sinning (v4-5). Our salvation is an act of God's grace, not something we earn, because when we were saved, we were still opposed to God; God made the dead alive.

Then we see the glory of the salvation we have received—we are seated in the heavenlies in Christ, verse 6, and we are receiving and will receive great riches in Christ, verse 7—again we are reminded by grace.

And then just in case we have missed it—we are reminded again in verse 8 of the realities of our salvation, by grace, through faith. God's doing—even faith is a gift. Emphatically, this is not by works, verse 9, this is not something that we have done. We have no grounds for boasting.

Our salvation, knowing Jesus Christ as Lord and saviour, having faith in Jesus; however we want to express what we have, it is all God's gift to us in Christ.

And so we respond in two ways. First, of course, we rejoice in what we have received by grace, and we respond to God with grateful thanksgiving.

And then second, as verse 10 of Ephesians 2 reminds us, we respond with the good works that God has prepared for us. We use the gifts God has given us for his glory, not to earn his favour, but in response to the grace and favour we have received.

So today:

Give thanks for God's grace!

Pray that we would always remember that we are saved by grace, and not try to earn our salvation.

Pray for wisdom over what it is that God wants you to do.

Activity for Families with Children

Starter: give out a gift—perhaps a chocolate or some similar treat. Talk about gifts—and how you cannot earn a free gift, like a chocolate.

Read Ephesians 2:8-10

How are we saved?

Why don't we boast about being Christians?

What are we supposed to do now?

Read: We are saved by God's grace. Jesus came and died for us as a free gift. He has made us into God people, and now he calls us to follow him, and to do the good works, the good things he wants us to do.

Prayer: Dear Heavenly Father, thank you for sending Jesus to save us. Help us to live for you in response to your grace. Amen.



Weekend

Acts 4:32-37 Using our Resources

Read Acts 4:32-37

For our final study this week, we are looking together at Acts 4. This is the second summary passage that Luke gives us in the book of Acts, to indicate what the first church in Jerusalem was like.

We see the close fellowship they enjoyed with one another, seen in the way they treated possessions as being for the benefit of the community (v32). We see the powerful testimony of the apostles to the truth (v33). If we were to look back into Acts 4:23-31, we would see a people who pray.

These three characteristics are the ones identified in Acts 2:42: teaching, fellowship and prayer, and we looked at them last week in relation to small groups.

Luke then gives us more information on their generosity, first giving us the general pattern—that they sold property as needed to care for the poor (v34-5). We then see a particular example of this in Barnabas, who sold a field and gave the money to the apostles to distribute (v36-7).

There was probably a particular issue with poverty in first century Jerusalem, and as we read through the rest of the New Testament, the practice of this church in Jerusalem is not followed exactly elsewhere, although regular offerings for those in need continue. So we do not need to organise our giving in exactly the way the first church did.

However, there are important principles about giving here that we need to take on board. We notice that they gave for the sake of the church, for the fellowship. We notice that they sought to meet the needs of their brothers and sisters in Christ, and we notice that their giving was sacrificial; once the field was sold, it was no longer Barnabas'

So today

Thank God for all the good things he has given you.

Pray for wisdom in how best to contribute to the needs of the saints.

Activity for Families with Children

Starter: talk about what happens when we give something to somebody else—perhaps a birthday present. What does it feel like when we give the gift? We give, and they receive—it is good to receive, but also good to give.

Read Acts 4:32-33

Why did the early church share everything?

What were the apostles doing?

Read: when we read about the first church in Jerusalem, we read about people who were generous and shared their possessions, and who listened to God's word. We are encouraged to do the same.

Prayer: Dear Lord Jesus, help me to be generous with what you have given me. Help me to keep listening to your word, the Bible.

Amen.



Friday Matthew 25:24-30 A Warning

Matthew 25:24-30

Today we come to the last section of the parable of the Talents, and it is the hardest section, as it contains a strong warning about how we respond to Jesus.

We begin in verse 24 with the servants description of his master. This is an important verse, as it indicates to us that this servant does not know his master—he is not a hard man; he has demonstrated great generosity. The servant has acted on the basis of this misunderstanding, and has hidden the talent out of fear (v25).

The master responds with condemnation of the servant (v26) - for not at least investing the money for a return (v27). The implication here is that he was not obliged to produce another talent, but he was obliged to do something with what he has been given.

His talent is taken and given to another, and he is cast out into the outer darkness—clearly, in the context, hell. (v28, 30). In the midst of this Jesus reminds us that he will give more to the one who has received (v29).

We may feel that the parable has taken a bit of an unexpected turn here. Why is the man treated so harshly? First, he misunderstands who is master is, he does not know him. And second, he does not do what he is supposed to do—he doesn't even do the simple thing and put the money in the bank.

There is a clear warning in this parable for all of us, about the importance of doing the things that God has called us to do. Whilst grace is freely given, those who receive grace respond with good works.

So today

Thank God for all that he has given us, and pray that we would be those who receive God's gifts thankfully, and use them.

Say sorry for the ways in which we have not used the gifts God has given.

Activity for Families with Children

Starter: look at the coins again from Wednesday's study. Remind people of what they were going to use them for.

Read Matthew 25:24-27

What does the servant do with his coin?

What should he have done?

Read: The wicked servant doesn't know what God is like, and doesn't use the things God has given him. That is what makes him a bad servant. God wants us to use the gifts we have been given for him.

Prayer: Dear Jesus, help me to use the good things you have given me for you.

Amen.



Tuesday 1 Peter 4:7-11 Motivation for Service

Read: 1 Peter 4:7-11

In this passage from 1 Peter, the apostle Peter reminds us of the reality of living today: the end of all things is at hand (v7). We might not walk the streets with a signboard saying 'the end is nigh', but we do remember that we are awaiting Christ's return. And so we live in the light of what is to come.

We are to be self-controlled (v7), and we are to love one another (v8). Then Paul shows us what being self-controlled and loving looks like in practice.

It means that we are hospitable to others, without grumbling—about the inconvenience or the cost (v9)

We are to make use of our gifts—but the gifts we have are to be used for the sake of other people, remembering that they are gifts we have received from God (v10).

Then in verse 11, we are reminded that we use all our gifts for the sake of God, and depending on God—whether speaking or serving, or anything else. Why? Verse 11 tells us—so that God may be glorified.

Peter wants us to live in the light of the end, to live in the light of Christ's return. As we do that, we are seeking to live lives that bring glory to God—by showing the world what he is like, by praising him, by showing people what a life changed by Jesus looks like.

That is our motivation for service—to bring glory to God not ourselves, because of what he has done for us in Christ, because of what he will do for us—and because he is God—and the glory should always be his.

So today:

Give thanks for all that we have in Jesus.

Say sorry to God for times when our motivation to serve has been more about ourselves than God.

Pray that we might use our gifts to serve other people

Activity for Families with Children

Starter: talk about important events in people's lives—like marriages, or holidays or birthdays etc. talk about the most important event coming in the world—Jesus' return

Read 1 Peter 4:7-8

Peter tells us that the end is coming - what are we supposed to do?

How can we show our love for each other?

Read: Peter wants us to remember that Jesus is coming back. and so we are to live as his people until he returns. We are to be self-controlled, and we are to be loving.

Prayer: Dear Lord Jesus, we thank you that you are coming back. help us to live for you until your return. Amen.



Wednesday Matthew 25:14-18 Different Gifts

Read: Matthew 25:14-18

Today is the first of three days we're spending looking at Matthew 25, the Parable of the Talents, a parable all about how we respond to Jesus in how we use our gifts.

Today in the parable we see that different people are given different gifts. We meet a man entrusting property to his servants (v14) - this man represents Jesus, and we are his servants.

He gives different numbers of talents to three servants. The talent was a unit of money—about 20 years wages for a labourer—so these gifts are all huge! Notice that the talents are given to each as is appropriate for the servant (v15)

We read about what happens—the ones with five and two double their money (v16-17), but the one with one talent doesn't do anything with it—he puts it in the ground (v18). We'll see the outcome of this on Friday, but even at this point, this doesn't look a good idea.

Two things come out of the parable today. First, we can see the importance of using the gifts that God has given us. We should follow the example of the ones with five or two talents.

Second, different people are given different gifts, and some people seem to be more gifted than others. but however much we feel we have been given—we can all use our different gifts for God's glory.

So today:

Give thanks to God for the gifts we have received

Pray that we would be those who are diligent in using our God-given gifts and abilities for God's glory.

Activity for Families with Children

Starter: give everyone a coin—and discuss how they might use it for 'something good'. The point here is to see how we can make use of what we have.

Read Matthew 25:14-15

Who do you think the man who went on the journey represents? Who are the servants?

What do you think the people should do with the talents?

Read: Jesus wants us to use the gifts he has given us. We should think of what we can do—and how we can do it for Jesus

Prayer: Dear Lord God, help us to use the things you have given us for your glory.

Amen.



Thursday Matthew 25:19-23 Faithful Servants

Read Matthew 25:19-23

Continuing today with Matthew 25, we come to verse 19, and the master of the servants returns. Naturally, he holds an accounting, to see what his servants have done with what they have received.

We begin with the servant who had received five talents, who has made five more, and presents them to his master (v20). His master commends him—he is a good and faithful servant, and so as a result, he will be set over much, and 'enter into the joy of his master' (v21). Here we see the context of the parable—this is about what we do with our lives this side of heaven; this is one of a number of parables in Matthew 24 and 25 which are all about being ready for Christ's return.

Here the message is clear: we are to use the gifts we have been given as we look forward to Christ's return; we look forward to being commended as good and faithful servants.

Then we meet the servant who has doubled his talents from two to four (v22). He too is commended by his master in verse 23. Notice here that he is commended in exactly the same way, and will receive the same reward. He may have 'only' produced two talents more, but he has been faithful with what he has been given, and so he is rewarded.

There are then two important lessons from this passage. First, we are encouraged to use what we have been given by God for God until Jesus returns. What we have belongs to the Lord, and so we should use it for his service.

Then, second, notice that we are to be faithful with what we have; whether two or five talents, our job is not to be someone else, but to be ourselves, and to use the gifts we have for God's glory.

So today

Give thanks to God for the gifts / talents he has given you.

Ask God to help you to use your talents / gifts for his glory

Activity for Families with Children

Starter: talk about what happens when we do something well—we receive praise. Talk about who we like to be praised by the most.

Read Matthew 25:20-21

What had the servant with five talents done?

What does his master say to him?

Read: The servant receives praise from his master, just as we will receive praise from Jesus on the last day. Imagine that! Imagine how wonderful it will be to be praised by Jesus.

Prayer: Dear Jesus, help us to be good and faithful servants with all you give us. Amen.