

Use It or Lose It!

(MATTHEW 25:24-30 NIV) *"Then the man who had received the one talent 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. ²⁵So I was afraid and went out and hid your talent in the ground. See, here is what belongs to you.' ²⁶"His master replied, 'You wicked, lazy servant! So you knew that I harvest where I have not sown and gather where I have not scattered seed? ²⁷Well then, you should have put my money on deposit with the bankers, so that when I returned I would have received it back with interest. ²⁸"Take the talent from him and give it to the one who has the ten talents.*

How many of you played in high school band? How many brass players? How many woodwinds? Any percussionists? Are any of you still playing regularly?

I'm thinking about getting a church band together to play the offertory next Sunday. How many of you are willing to join the church band? [*Ad lib* to get response that we haven't practiced; so we "lost our lip".]

The great cellist, Pablo Casals, continued to practice several hours a day, well into his 90s after he had retired from public performances. One day he was asked why he continued to practice under those circumstances. He responded, "I have the sense that I'm making progress."

My guitar instructor says, "Miss one day of practice and you can tell it. Miss two days of practice and your teacher knows it. Miss three days of practice and everyone knows it!"

Every athlete and musician knows what we're talking about. Every farmer knows that seed left in the bin loses its fertility. It's nature's way: "Use it or lose it." The one-talent man didn't use what he had; and he lost it.

This congregation is blessed with many gifts that *are* being used:

- A Music Ministry known throughout the community...
- An historic room that is visually conducive to worship...
- A sense of ministry: Food Pantry; Loaves and Fishes...
- A spirit of fellowship when we gather...

But there is a hole in the umbrella: something is missing, and there is evidence that somewhere there is a gift that is not being used. Let me explain.

In the years immediately following WWII, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) was the fastest growing denomination in the world. Then in 1957 virtually every denomination (including the Disciples) started a decline that continues today. The same pattern is seen in most congregations in this nation.

To bring it home: the 1957 yearbook of the Christian Church shows this church with an active membership of 1,208, with 25% of all incoming funds going to

missions and outreach.

The 2014 yearbook shows an active membership of 472, with 7% of all incoming funds going to missions and outreach.

Is there a connection? If so, which came first, the decline in membership or the decline in missions and outreach giving? Did one cause the other?

Whatever the cause and effect, the decline in both is undeniable. So, here's my question: "What do we have that we stopped using?"

Make it personal: think of some part of your life in which, in some way, at some level you're no longer at your best. What did you do when you *were* at your best that you may not be doing as faithfully today?

And, since most congregations have similar experiences—their best is in the past—looking back, when do you remember the church (any church) at its best? What were the qualities you experienced in that church then?

Remember the numbers I just quoted: active membership declined from 1208 in 1957 to 472 in 2013, while missions and outreach offerings declined from 25% to 7% of total church income during that same time period. Is there a connection?

During the 60s and 70s Mainline Protestant churches began to de-emphasize evangelism, world missions and community service, and turned their energies and resources increasingly inward to nurture and care for their own members. The church shifted emphasis from a *Great Commission* mentality to a "Field of Dreams" fantasy—"If you build it they will come." They didn't come.

I'm convinced that, more than any other single factor *that shift in emphasis*, from "Go" to "Come" is behind the overall decline in the church in North America.

The call of Christ is to "Go into all the world." The parable of the Banquet carries the clear message, "Go and bring them in." The church is "sent" and is equipped with every Spiritual Gift needed to carry out the call. And when those gifts aren't used... Well, the numbers are clear.

What's the connection? Every strong, growing congregation I know has people involved in serving and ministering within *and* beyond its four walls. I'm not aware of any *strong* congregation whose energies and resources are focused entirely on taking care of its members.

Is there a connection? Two stories: Wheeling Avenue Christian Church in Tulsa closed its doors around the early 1980s. They'd been a leading congregation in Oklahoma; but declined until they could no longer sustain the facility and pay salaries and utilities. The remaining members (fewer than 20 as I recall) voted to dissolve their corporation and to unite with First Christian Church downtown.

They had over \$1 million in endowments plus the income from the sale of their

property. They established the Wheeling Avenue Christian Foundation and took the money with them. With close to \$2 million in 1980, what might they have done to revitalize their church and make it viable and functional again? But they wouldn't touch that money. They didn't use it; and they lost everything.

Second story: Jerry Mash is an attorney who also has a seminary degree and a gift for leading churches from the brink of death back to vitality and effectiveness. One such church was First Christian Church in Seminole, Oklahoma. During the mid-70s there was a split and several families formed an independent Christian Church. The remaining members struggled to keep the doors open. Finally, they approached the regional minister about closing their doors.

He urged them to see if Jerry would serve as their pastor. He did; and said he would return his salary if the church would match it and use part of the money for mission offerings and the rest to fund hands-on service and ministry projects in the community. Three years later their attendance had grown from less than twenty to over 100. They hired a full-time minister and kept growing. Is there a connection?

I never heard of a church going broke and closing its doors because it used its resources for outreach or missions or local ministries. I truly believe that ministering in the name of Jesus Christ will never bankrupt a church, nor even deprive it! And no church that so ministers will ever lack for anything it really needs!

So, here's a second question: how do we reclaim those qualities we no longer are using?

 I was a decent trombone player: high school all-district, all-region, all-state; college; section-leader in the Third Marine Division Band... Even played a few professional gigs.

But immediately after returning from Vietnam I started seminary, and between commuting and studies and class and family and serving a little student church, the trombone got put in the closet. Oh, for awhile I dug it out occasionally; but it was gone.

Then, forty years later I was serving my first interim ministry in Carrollton, Missouri. The high school band director was in that church, and he came to me and said, "I need a trombone player. The high school music department is doing Meredith Wilson's "Music Man" this fall, and I don't have a trombone player."

I said, "David, I haven't really played in forty years!"

He said, "You have 90 days to get your lip back. Rehearsals start October 1."

Well, I did it; and I didn't embarrass myself; but let me tell about getting back what you haven't used for a long time: it's hard! It takes work, discipline, commitment... You have to "use what you have"; and if you haven't used it in awhile,

there may be some sore muscles in the process of getting it back.

I've been here only a little more than three months; but I see in this church every quality needed—including some recent history—to live as a vital, dynamic, growing church. But you have to use what you have. Maybe the real issue is that—as a congregation—you don't remember what you really have. "Bridges" is designed specifically with the hope of fixing that.

How do we get it back? An ancient proverb says, "A journey of a thousand miles begins with the first step."