

**BODY – BUILDING**

**“Use It Or Lose It!”**

*“For everyone who has will be given more...”*

**“The more you use something, the stronger it gets!”**

At least that’s what Texas Rangers baseball executive Nolan Ryan thinks.

In fact, after a Hall of Fame career in which he threw 7 No Hitters – struck out almost 6,000 batters – and won 324 games, Ryan’s become something of a maverick – at least when it comes to grooming young arms on the Ranger’s pitching staff.

You see, Ryan believes modern pitchers have been pampered a little too much.

He believes they’ve been sheltered and not allowed to think for themselves or develop the arm strength to go late into games – like they did in the old days.

*“Our expectations of them have been lowered,”* Ryan says. *“There’s no reason why kids today can’t pitch as many innings as people did in my era.”*

Of course, not everybody agrees with Ryan. Especially when millions have been invested in these young arms. Clubs are naturally cautious about protecting their investments and slowly nurturing their prospects along.

**But, the results being seen on the Ranger’s pitching staff speak for themselves!**

**For example...**

**After allowing the most runs in the American League in 2008, the Rangers allowed the 4<sup>th</sup> fewest the following year – and keep on improving.**

**In fact, they've been one of the best staffs in baseball – even reaching the World Series last year!**

**And, Nolan Ryan's got a lot to do with that!**

**Dispensing with things like traditional "pitch counts," Ryan's Rangers have embarked on a unique training program in which pitchers are groomed to throw longer – throw harder – and throw more often than ever before.**

**And, instead of tiring out, these pitchers are getting stronger and actually less prone to injury.**

*"Baseball got into allowing these kids not to do the work," he says.*

*"Money is the reason and the excuse you get from organizations – that we're protecting our investments."*

*"Well, protect the investment too much," he says, "And you may not get the return."*

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**Well, Nolan Ryan's approach to pitching is the same way we might think of Spiritual Gifts and how they relate to what Jesus is telling us today.**

**You see, when it comes to the Gifts God's given each of us, there's some sense of having to "use them or lose them." The status quo just won't do!**

**And, while this parable – in its eschatological (end times) setting – is certainly a warning and a reminder that there is an ultimate judgment and a final settling of accounts...**

**Jesus is also encouraging us to seize the opportunity of a lifetime by investing ourselves fully in the Kingdom of God right now!**

**For example...**

**Let's just suppose someone dumped a million dollars in your lap to take care of while they were away.**

**Now, the *very least* you could do – as the parable suggests – is to simply tuck it away in an interest-bearing account. And, at just 4 or 5 percent a year, you'd be raking in a cool \$40 to 50 thousand!**

**\$40 to 50 Grand for doing nothing more than sticking it in a bank and sitting on it!**

**Of course, you could do more with it – take more risks for a higher yield. But, it would be foolish not to do even the least you could do!**

**Right?**

**And so, Jesus' parable and the judgment that follows this third servant, makes perfect sense when we consider it that way and realize this servant couldn't have cared less about his Master's business.**

**He couldn't be bothered to even do -- the very least he could do!**

**I mean, it's not like the Master in this story is unreasonable!**

**He doesn't demand the same results from each servant!**

**Instead, he carefully considers their individual abilities and evaluates their skill. Then, he invests in each of them accordingly and commends the first two when he returns!**

**But, not for how much they've earned! It's important that we understand that!**

**After all, the first servant realizes a return 2 ½ times the second servant.**

**Instead, he judges them on how faithful they've been in simply using what they had!**

**And, that's one of the beauties of this parable!**

**You see, no one's judged against anybody else! The only thing that matters is what each of them did with what they had!**

**So, the third servant's got no excuse!**

**True, his initial stake wasn't as big as the other two guys. But, he had something unique to himself and he simply failed to use it.**

**Retired pastor and author, David Redding puts it well when he says:**

**The third servant was worse than a spendthrift. He played safe. He played dead. He didn't try. He buried his stake. That's what Jesus hated far worse than crime: *dead wood*. Remember, He cursed a fig tree, not because it was diseased, or ugly, but because it didn't bear any fruit.**

**He was, as Redding says, a "deadbeat" – plain and simple!**

**So, he's rightly judged.**

**And, this parable, in its eschatological (end times) setting – is certainly a parable of judgment and a warning that there *will be* a final reckoning when the Master – Jesus -- returns to settle accounts and asks what we did with everything entrusted to us.**

**We can't ever forget that!**

**But, there's a flip side to this parable we don't want to miss either!**

**And, that flip side is about seizing the opportunity of a lifetime when it comes our way.**

**Think about it in terms of that million dollars again.**

**Now, I don't know about you, but I certainly don't have a million dollars!**

**Not even in monopoly money!**

**But, if I did...**

**If I were suddenly given a million bucks in trust...**

**And, was told that I could work it however I wanted...**

**Well, the whole thing would be life-changing!**

**Which is what the first two servants realized immediately!**

**This was the opportunity of a lifetime and Jesus says the man who'd received the 5 talents "*went at once*" and put his money to work...**

**As did the second man.**

**They realized what they had...**

**They understand that they were given a tremendous opportunity and an extraordinary gift...**

**And so, they didn't just sit on it or hide it or hoard it and pass it up!**

**They knew this was the opportunity they wouldn't get again and they were determined to take full advantage of it!**

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**Back when I was in seminary I actually finished my degree a year ahead of schedule.**

**Now, it's not that I was smarter than anybody else. I just had some transfer credits and took summer classes and, as a result, managed to earn enough credits for graduation in two years rather than the traditional three.**

**Problem was – even though I could get my degree -- I wasn't yet ready to be ordained.**

**And so, with basically time on my hands, I decided to do a second degree while I waited.**

**The only hitch was once you got your degree you didn't get any more financial aid. And so, if I wanted to do this second degree, I was going to have to finance it 100% myself!**

**So, I got a job working as a security guard.**

**I tried watching my expenditures.**

**I wasn't sure I was actually going to be able to save enough. But, at least I was gonna try!**

**Then, one day, I got a letter from the Dean of Student Affairs.**

**It was your basic form letter.**

**But, in that letter, it said that "3" scholarships were being made available for this degree program I wanted to do – something that had never been done before. And, any students who were interested were welcome to apply.**

**Well, you know I jumped all over that! It was a unique opportunity! I couldn't pass it up!**

**Now, I didn't know if I'd qualify. But, I figured I'd take a shot.**

**And, about a month later I received another letter telling me I was one of the "3" students awarded a scholarship!**

**Just like that!**

**A totally unexpected gift!**

**And so, now I had a year to specialize in whatever subject I wanted...**

**Take the classes I always wanted to take...**

**To relax without any financial pressures hanging over my head...**

**To learn just for the love of learning!**

**And so, you know what I did?**

**I began sleeping late...**

**Skipping classes...**

**Blowing off assignments...**

**What did I care?**

**It wasn't costing me anything!**

**It wasn't my money – right?**

**Well, of course, that's NOT what I did!**

**That'd be stupid!**

**Instead, I went to class...**

**I did my assignments...**

**I soaked up all I could and enjoyed every last minute of it because it was such an unexpected gift!**

**And, it turned out to be the best year of school in my life!**

**Well, in essence, this is what Jesus is telling us in this parable.**

**Yes, there'll be a final reckoning...**

**Yes, there'll be a final settling of accounts...**

**But, in between “now” and “then” is the opportunity of a lifetime!**

**It's the opportunity to embrace those "Gifts" and "talents" and "abilities" God has given you!**

**And, the wonderful part is that God doesn't measure you up against anybody else! It doesn't matter what anybody else has been given. All that matters is what you're doing with yours...**

**With the Gifts God's given uniquely to you!**

**Remember, in the parable, the Master isn't concerned that each of the servants brought back different amounts. He's only concerned about what they did with what they had!**

**I mean, he's willing to accept even the most paltry interest his money would've have gotten on deposit with the bankers. So, it isn't as if he's making unreasonable demands!**

**He just wants them all to try!**

**To embrace this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity and invest themselves fully in his work!**

**You see – and this is crucial for us to understand today -- not only does Jesus invite us to consider what we're doing with the gifts we've been given...**

**He also wants us to consider the kind of God we serve!**

**A generous – big-hearted – extravagant God!**

**A God Who literally takes part of His Kingdom...**

**Entrusts it to our care...**

**And, in the power of the Holy Spirit, tells us to "run" with it and work for its increase in the world!**

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**Eleven years ago, a man named Denny Bellesi was preaching on this same Parable of the Talents, when he issued a unique challenge to the congregation he served.**

**Having gotten permission from the church elders, Bellesi said he needed 100 volunteers to come forward and who would be willing to participate in a unique experiment together.**

**Nobody knew what he had in mind. But, volunteers stepped up. And, when they did, Bellesi promptly handed each of them a crisp \$100 dollar bill.**

**This was God's money, they were told. Which was literally true since it came from the church coffers.**

**It wasn't theirs – but they were being given it now to use in some way that would further God's Kingdom on earth.**

**Then they were told they'd all be asked to report back in 90 days about what they had done and what had happened when they put those unexpected gifts to work.**

**Well, at the end of those 3 months, the church was anxious to hear what had happened with that \$10,000 dollars.**

**So, people got up. Stories were told about how they'd used their gifts and how God had taken that initial gift of just \$10,000 and grown it into more than \$500,000!**

**Half-a-million dollars!**

**Of course, the point here isn't about money.**

**It isn't about money, at all.**

**In fact, on his website, Bellesi says their mission is *“to turn heads and hearts into the hands and feet of Christ.”***

**And, you certainly don't need money to do that!**

**You see, for all its talk about “talents” – which actually was a unit of monetary value – money has nothing to do with it!**

**It’s simply about considering what you’re doing with the Gifts you’ve been given...**

**And, and using those gifts for God’s Kingdom --growing by Grace – into the man or woman God always intended for you to be!**

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**In his book, *If You Want To Walk On Water, You’ve Got To Get Out Of The Boat*, John Ortberg tells of a phone call his mother Kathy received one day from his grandfather.**

**He’d been going through some of his late wife’s things and came across a box of old dishes. He was just going to get rid of them, but noticed they were blue and remembered that blue was one of Kathy’s favorite colors.**

***Why don’t you take a look at them,*” the old man said.**

***“If you want them, they’re yours; otherwise, I’ll just give them to the Salvation Army.”***

**Well, Ortberg’s mother went through the attic expecting to find nothing more than some run-of-the-mill dishware.**

**But, what she discovered when she opened the box was some of the most exquisite china she’d ever seen!**

**Each plate, Ortberg says, had been individually painted with a pattern of forget-me-nots.**

**The cups, he adds, were all inlaid mother-of-pearl.**

**Everything was rimmed with gold.**

**These dishes, as they discovered, had been handmade in a Bavarian factory which was destroyed during World War II – so they were literally irreplaceable.**

**The funny thing, he says, is that even though his mother had been part of the family for twenty years, she had never seen this marvelous china.**

**Not even once!**

**So, she asked her husband – Ortberg’s dad, who had grown up in the family – and he couldn’t recall ever seeing the china either!**

**Well, eventually they asked some older members of the family and discovered the secret of the china.**

**Apparently when John Ortberg’s grandmother was young, she was given this china over a period of years.**

**They weren’t a wealthy family, and the china was very valuable, so she only got a piece at a time...**

**A cup here...**

**A plate there...**

**Special gifts for confirmations or graduations or birthdays.**

**But, because this china was so exquisite, Ortberg’s grandmother was afraid it might get broken if she ever used it.**

**So, instead of using it and displaying it proudly, she would wrap each individual piece in tissue...**

**Put it in a box...**

**And store it in the attic for a very special occasion.**

**But, Ortberg adds, “*No occasion that special ever came along. So my grandmother went to her grave with the greatest gift of her life unopened and unused.*”**

**Then he says...**

**“*My mother was given those dishes. She uses them promiscuously – every chance she has.*”**

**“*They have finally made it out of the box.*”**

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**Well, as we wrap up this series on Spiritual Gifts today, each of us needs to consider what we’re doing with our Gifts.**

**Are we keeping them wrapped up – undercover – hidden away – buried and out of sight?**

**As Ortberg says, “*There’s no tragedy like the tragedy of the unopened gift.*”**

**Or, have we taken them out of the box?**

**And, are we using them – exploring them -- and risking them in partnership with the God of all Gifts?**

**The God whose Grace always yields an *increase* with whatever’s invested in Him?**

**The choice is ours!**

**But, remember, there aren’t any “No-Talent” people in Jesus parable.**

**Just people who refuse to use their Gifts!**

**Funny thing, but at life’s end, most people say they don’t regret the things the did.**

**It's the things they didn't do that haunts them!**

**Opportunities missed...**

**Chances not taken...**

**Gifts left in the box!**

**On the other hand, there're those who see their Gifts for what they are...**

**The opportunity of a lifetime...**

**And, a chance to completely share in the Master's happiness by using those Gifts every way possible...**

**And, by embracing God's best Gift of all...**

**His Son...**

**Our crucified and Risen Savior...**

**Jesus Christ – the Lord of all Gifts...**

**And, God's greatest Gift to you!**

**Amen.**