“Opportunity, Fidelity, and Reward,”
Sermon at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church

[January 1955]
Montgomery, Ala

Drawing on George Buttrick’s published lecture, “Opportunity, Fidelity, and Reward,” King acknowledges in this handwritten outline that the wicked often prosper while the righteous suffer. He highlights the “inner peace” and “unsurpassable joy” of those with the ability to be faithful.

Text (The parable of the Talent [Matt 25:14–30])

Introduction—
(1) The significance of the parable
(2) The story in brief

I. Unto one he gave five. Let us notice first that the [parable?] is a clear and sober denial of the equality of human endowment (unto one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his several abilities). The findings of the IQ tests are not new. They were stated long ago in this story. As soon as we reach maturity we come to realize that certain gifts are ours within measure and that certain others have been denied us.

(a) Elaborate on the phrase equality of all men (All men are created equal).
(b) Life is a landscapes job. We are handed a site, large or small, rugged or flat, picturesque or commonplace, whose general outlines and contours are largely determined for us. Both limitation and opportunity are involved in every site.

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1 Buttrick, The Parables of Jesus (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1928), pp. 241–250. George Arthur Buttrick (1892–1986) was born in Northumberland, England. In 1915 he received degrees in philosophy from Lancaster Independent Theological College and Victoria University, and became minister at the First Union Congregational Church in Quincy, Illinois. Buttrick accepted the post as minister of New York City’s Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church in 1927, and during his twenty-eight years there, taught homiletics at Union Theological Seminary. He served as president of the Federal Council of Churches, the predecessor of the liberal National Council of Churches, from 1940 to 1942. Buttrick wrote numerous other books including Jesus Came Preaching (1931), based on lectures he delivered at Yale University.

2 At the end of the document, King wrote “Preached at Dexter Jan, 1954.” He did not preach regularly at Dexter until May 1954, which suggests he wrote the wrong year on the document and probably meant 1955. King was also scheduled to give a sermon with this title on 30 August 1953 (“Opportunity, Fidelity, and Reward,” King Jr’s Subject at Ebenezer,” Atlanta Daily World, 29 August 1953).

3 Buttrick, The Parables of Jesus, p. 244. “The findings of the intelligence tests are not new—they were succinctly expressed long ago in this story. On reaching years of maturity we begin to realize (with some heartburning, perhaps) that certain gifts and graces are ours within measure and that certain others have been denied us.”

4 Fosdick, On Being a Real Person, p. 69. “Life is a landscaping job. We are handed a site, ample or small, rugged or flat, picturesque or commonplace, whose general outlines and contours are largely determined for us. Both opportunity and limitation are involved in every site.” On the page containing this quote, King wrote “Life Is a Landscaping Job” in his personal copy of On Being a Real Person.
(c) to avoid any charge of favoritism, the story represents every man as having some talent. No one is left talentless. 

II Let us notice second that an individual is judged not by the number of talents he possesses, but by his faithful handling what he has. It is significant to notice that the commendation of the two talent man is in identical language as that of the five talent man. Thus we are introduced to a new system of measurement. Other standards stressed quantity. Jesus stressed quality. (Tell the story of the widows mite). In terms of quantity, she gave less than anybody. In terms of quality, she gave more. So in computing success, Jesus had his own revolutionary standards. The question is not "how much talent have you earned" but "how much faithfulness have you manifested?"

(a) No greater thing can be said in a person funeral than "he has been faithful and loyal."

(b) This is a note that needs to be sounded in the ears of so many Christians in [our?] churches. A plea to young people to be faithful. One thing that appalls me most is the unfaithfulness of most Christian. The average deacon doesn't take it seriously. The man who is faithful in his ignorance is...

(C) You don't need a broad cultural background (PhD) or a large bank account to be faithful.

(D) I'm not If you are an usher in the Church, don't take it slight, but look upon it with honor and be faithful in doing it.

(E) The story of the faithful minister in N J.

(F) Quote Douglas Mallach.

III Let us notice finally that there is a reward for faithfulness. "Well done, good and faithful servant: thou hast been faithful over a few things; I will set thee over upon it with honor and be faithful in doing it.

5 Buttrick, The Parables of Jesus, p. 245. "Again, it must be noted, lest Heaven be charged with a gross favoritism, that the story represents every man as having some talent. No one is left empty-handed."

6 Cf Luke 21:1-4

7 Buttrick, The Parables of Jesus, p. 246. "It is significant therefore that the commendation of the two-talent man is in identical language with that spoken to his more gifted brother. Not a word is changed, not an accent of the voice is different. Thus we are introduced to a new system of measurements. There is a widow-woman in the portrait gallery of the Gospels who cast a farthing into the Temple treasury and of whom Jesus said that she gave 'more than they all together.' By what reckoning did Jesus arrive at such an estimate? Judging her gift by monetary value, she gave less than anybody. Judging it by love-value, she gave more than the total gifts of all the other worshippers. So in computing success, Jesus had his own revolutionary standards. The question is not, 'How many talents have you earned?' but rather, 'How many, compared with the number entrusted to you?'" In another undated handwritten draft of this sermon, King offered the following variation on this theme: "If The parable proclaims the significance of one talent. The ruler was angry because one talent was not used. Every talent is needed in the divine economy. This man lacked the imagination to see that every talent is precious. A real reason for his failure was his fear. He was afraid. He dared not venture. He lacked faith in God and life. He failed to see how much he is needed. He would not speak out." (Opportunity, Fidelity, and Reward, Sermon outline, January 1955.)

8 King probably refers to Malloch's 1926 poem "Be the Best of Whatever You Are" as he does in his sermon "Overcoming an Inferiority Complex," Sermon Delivered at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, 14 July 1957, p. 308 in this volume.
many things, enter thou into the joy of thy lord. Here we find the answer to that question which has always gripped the religionist. Is there a reward for righteousness? Indeed the whole question of why the wicked prosper and the righteous suffer is another form of the same question. Religion answers this question with an insistence that there is a reward for faithfulness.

(a) Now it must be stressed that this reward is not necessarily material. Some of the most unfaithful and even wicked people enjoy material prosperity. Many of these even go to their graves prosperous.

(b) Deal with the Deuteronomic Idea. The Deuteronimist did catch hold to an eternal truth.

(c) The true reward for faithfulness comes first in terms of an inner peace. There is a sort of unsurpassable joy that comes when a man lives consistently with his own ideals.

Preached at Dexter Jan., 1954.

AD CSKC Sermon file, folder 68, “Opportunity, Fidelity, and Reward.”

9 Cf. Matthew 25:21, 23
10 King refers to the argument formulated during the Babylonian exile that explained God’s judgment of Israel as punishment for the nation’s disobedience of Mosaic Law. He answered a test question on this subject for George Kelsey’s class on the Bible at Morehouse (King, Examination answers, Bible, December 3, 1946).
11 King wrote this in a second pen.

“The Crisis in the Modern Family,” Sermon at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church

[8 May 1955]
[Montgomery, Ala.]

In this typed Mother’s Day sermon, King blames war, urbanization, industrialization, and individualism for the disintegration of the family. “In the average modern family,” King affirms, “there is a civil war in progress in which the parents are revolting against each other and the children are revolting against the parents. In the modern family individualism has gone mad.” He concludes by challenging his listeners to develop some practical ways to increase intimacy within the family, such as developing a family altar and attending church together.

1 King wrote “Preached at Dexter on Mother’s Day, 1955” on the outside of the folder containing this document. His announced sermon topic for 8 May 1955 at Dexter was “Crisis Facing Present-Day Family Life in America” (“Special Mother’s Service,” Montgomery Advertiser, 8 May 1955).