

Born to Win

Created Equal?

by Ronald L. Dart

Once upon a time, there was a man sitting quietly by a pool of water. He was a very *sick* man and he... he doubted that he had very long to live. And while he stared into the water, something stirred the water. It was almost like a hand reached out and *swished* the water back and forth, but no one was there. Wondering, the man reached out his own hand and swished the water back and forth, wondering what would have caused that movement. But as he did it, he began to feel better. And, standing up, he noticed his pain was gone, and he felt stronger. As the day went forward, he realized that, not only was he getting stronger with every step he took, he just *wasn't sick* anymore. His friends were *totally* surprised at his miraculous recovery; and in the natural course of events they learned about the pool, and they learned about the water being swished back and forth. And for some time after that, all kinds of sick people went down to the pool and washed in its water, but no one else got any better. No one got any better, that is, until the same season the following year, when another very sick man was healed after a similar moving of the water—miraculously, suddenly, instantly healed. A lame man who touched the water just *after* him was not helped in the least. This happened again a third year, and the year after that, and the bad news was that only one person was healed every year. And although it was at the same season, it was not entirely predictable; it could be on any one of several days.

Many years passed with this pattern continuing, and then one day a man walked into the area of the pool and looked around at all the sick people who were lying there. It was at the season of the year when an angel was said to stir the waters, and that the first person into the pool would be healed. Yes, the name of the pool was Bethesda, and the man who walked in on this day was none other than Jesus of Nazareth. And he looked around and his eyes focused on a man lying there who had had an infirmity for 38 years. We don't know how long he'd been coming to the water—how many years in this season he had spent lying there waiting for the moving of the water.

John 5

KJ2000

⁶ When Jesus saw him lying there, and knew that he had been now a long time in that condition, he said unto him, Will you be made whole?

⁷ The invalid man answered him, Sir, I have no man, when the water is troubled, to put me into the pool: but while I am coming, another steps down before me.

⁸ Jesus said unto him, Rise, take up your bed, and walk.

⁹ And immediately the man was made whole, and took up his bed, and walked:[...]

Now, what lies behind this story is even more interesting, I think, than the incident itself. What I thought was fascinating about the encounter was the resemblance to a *lottery*. You know, year after year, only one person was healed, and the selection was *absolutely* random. A blind man might not see the moving of the water and he would not know. A deaf man might be looking the wrong way and not hear it. A lame man couldn't reach it fast enough. It *all* was a matter of time and chance as to who was in the right place at the right time when the water was moved and got into it first. Imagine: You're standing by this pool, and you yourself are sick (maybe suffering the long-term effects of polio), and

you know you're going to spend the rest of your life in this crippled state you're in. But standing right next to you is a man far sicker than you who would *die* in a few days, perhaps, if he couldn't touch the water first. Would you beat him into the water? Or would you help him in to the water?

You know, even Jesus healing on this occasion had the same random quality to it. Because...maybe he selected this man for a reason. If he did, he didn't say so. But more important, *he only healed one man* in this place on this day. Exactly like what would have happened if the waters had been moved. That one man won the lottery. The rest did not. Now, on the surface, it seems kind of unfair, doesn't it? But at the same time, it's a lot like life. It's not *fair* that one man is sick and another is not. Why does one man get cancer while another man does not get cancer? Now, you can make the argument, "Well, this guy got lung cancer because he was a smoker." Okay, why do some smokers get cancer and some smokers don't? And we still are left, you see, with the same question. It's like a lottery. (Researchers tell us there's a genetic element to cancer, but that's not very well understood.)

Our experience of life is really a lot like what we read in the Bible story. Things happen to us in a way that is best described as *completely random*. We don't *like* this very much. We like to think our lives have *meaning*. If we're sick, we would like to know what we did wrong so we *won't do it again*. Right? We'd like to get some cause and effect here, so that we know how to live our lives. But it's discomfiting to think that all those sick people at the pool of Bethesda were sick for just such random accidents as the healing of the waters were. It's disturbing to our hoped-for view of the world. Well, there was a day when Jesus was going down a road, and his disciples were with him.

John 9

AKJV

¹ And as Jesus passed by, he saw a man which was blind from his birth.

² And his disciples [*who knew about the man*] asked him, saying, Master, who did sin, this man, or his parents, that he was born blind?

The disciples didn't want to think about this as a random act. They didn't want to think of life as a lottery. They were looking for cause and effect. Now, the logical presumption for them was that sickness and disease are in the world because of *sin*: something was done wrong. God made a perfect world and we've messed it up. What did he do? It would be unfair for a man to be *blind* when he had done nothing wrong. Well, Jesus answered, "Neither."

John 9

AKJV

³ Jesus answered, Neither has this man sinned, nor his parents: but that the works of God should be made manifest in him.

And Jesus healed him. Now, the conventional wisdom is that this man was born blind *so Jesus could heal him*. But that's not exactly what the passage says. Now, we *know* (because we know human nature) that the man *and* his parents had sinned. What Jesus is saying is that the sin was not *the cause* of his blindness. Now, the core argument here...and it's completely logical, if you just think about it. The core argument is that if the sin were the cause of the blindness, then everyone who sins should be blind, right, if it's just a simple cause and effect? But the fact is that not all sinners fare equally in the world. Some get rich, others wax poor. Some can see, and some are blind. It is a lot like a lottery. Jesus, on one occasion, decided that he needed to address this with the audience that was before him. We're told in Luke 13, verse 1...

Luke 13

¹ There were present at that season some that told him of the Galilaeans, whose blood Pilate

had mingled with their sacrifices.

He came upon them sacrificing and killed a bunch of them.

Luke 13

AKJV

² And Jesus answering said to them, Suppose you that these Galilaeans were sinners above all the Galilaeans, because they suffered such things?

“Do you think they’re the worst of the lot up there, and that’s *why* it happened to them?” Because that *was* the conventional wisdom; that’s what people *thought* this was all about. And Jesus said,

Luke 13

AKJV

³ I tell you, No: but, except you repent, you shall all likewise perish.

⁴ Or those eighteen, on whom the tower in Siloam fell, and slew them, [...]

There they were at the foot of this tower, minding their own business, doing their work, and the tower fell on him and killed 18 of them. He says, “Do you think that these were *bad people*?” By that he means, “Do you think”...

Luke 13

AKJV

⁴ [...] that they were sinners above all men that dwelled in Jerusalem?

⁵ I tell you, No: but, except you repent, you shall all likewise perish.

Sure, those people were sinners; but they were not merely sinners, they were *profoundly* unlucky, and they were no worse than those who survived.

Now, none of this is intended to be fatalistic. What we do in our lives makes a difference. But the important thing to understand is: it doesn’t make *all* the difference. The wisest man who ever lived said this:

Ecclesiastes 9

AKJV

¹¹ I returned, and saw under the sun, that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favor to men of skill; but time and chance happens to them all.

That’s in Ecclesiastes 9, and verse 11, and he just told us that life is a lottery. Now, I’ve told you all that to tell you this: All men are *not* created equal.

The first time I ever heard the Declaration of Independence, I knew something wasn’t quite right. It said,

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal[.]

United States Declaration of Independence - July 4, 1776

Now, if there's one thing that was clear to me (even as a very young man) it was that all the people *I* knew were *a long way* from equal. I have a rough idea of what the Founding Fathers meant by the phrase, but there's almost no way to say it, with any qualifiers, that it still isn't wrong; and any serious reader of the Bible ought to know that. For example, one of the best-known of Jesus' parables, the Parable of the Talents, is a *really* interesting case in point. (And you'll find this in the 25th chapter of Matthew; it begins in verse 14.)

Matthew 25

AKJV

¹⁴ For the kingdom of heaven is as a man traveling into a far country, who called his own servants, and delivered to them his goods.

¹⁵ And to one he gave five talents, to another two, and to another one; to every man according to his several ability; and straightway took his journey.

Now, if there's one thing that's clear right off the bat, it's that these men are *not all equal*. They differed in ability by a ratio of *five to one* in the parable; and none of them needed to be overloaded in terms of responsibility, and so the master gave them what they needed in comparison with their ability. So, right off the bat, these men are not all equal.

Matthew 25

AKJV

¹⁶ Then he that had received the five talents went and traded with the same, and made them other five talents.

¹⁷ And likewise he that had received two, he also gained other two.

¹⁸ But he that had received one went and dig in the earth, and hid his lord's money.

So we have three different responses to the gifts that were given to them. Well...

Matthew 25

AKJV

¹⁹ After a long time the lord of those servants comes, and reckons with them.

²⁰ And so he that had received five talents came and brought other five talents, saying, Lord, you delivered to me five talents: behold, I have gained beside them five talents more. [*I've doubled your money.*]

²¹ His lord said to him, Well done, you good and faithful servant: you have been faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things: enter you into the joy of your lord.

"You're in my good graces. We're gonna do lots of good stuff together", says his lord. Think about that. The object of the exercise was to find out how this man would handle a modest level of responsibility commensurate with his own abilities. And since he handled them extremely well, the master knew that he could handle a great deal *more* responsibility than he had been given up to this point. And remember, Jesus said the kingdom of heaven is like this. Well, the guy that had received two talents came and said,

Matthew 25

AKJV

²² [...] Lord, you delivered to me two talents: behold, I have gained two other talents beside them.

Now, in one manner of looking at this the results that these people produced were the same. They both doubled what was given to them. But we understand right up front: they were not equal. They just produced, based upon what they had to work with, equal results, and they were *rewarded* equally.

Matthew 25

AKJV

²³ His lord said to him, Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things: enter you into the joy of your lord.

Similar results, similar reward. Now here comes the clincher, though.

Matthew 25

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²⁴ Then he who had received the one talent came and said, Lord, I knew you that you are a hard man, reaping where you have not sown, and gathering where you have not spread:

²⁵ And I was afraid, and went and hid your talent in the earth: lo, there you have what is yours.

Now, this is a man of considerably less ability than the first guy. We should cut him some slack, right? We should give him a break. Maybe, if he's a student at school, we should just pass him on to the next grade. In any case, we should not do anything to damage his self-esteem, right? That would be a *terrible* thing to do. So what happened to him? Well...

Matthew 25

AKJV

²⁶ His lord answered and said to him, You wicked and slothful servant [*You lazy lout.*], you knew that I reap where I sowed not, and gather where I have not strewed:

²⁷ You ought therefore to have put my money to the exchangers, and then at my coming I should have received my own with usury.

²⁸ Take therefore the talent from him, and give it to him which has ten talents.

²⁹ For to every one that has shall be given, and he shall have abundance: but from him that has not shall be taken away even that which he has.

³⁰ And cast you the unprofitable servant into outer darkness: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

We went a lot further than damaging this poor boy's self-esteem in this case, didn't we? Remember, Jesus started off this parable by saying that *the kingdom of heaven* is like this. There's a well-intentioned philosophy abroad that thinks that we should work for *equal outcomes* among people—that we should always try to have the same outcome and the same results in this way. This means that all students in school must pass, even if we have to hold back the brightest. Their vision of the way things really ought to be is that everybody should always get an "A". There's going to be a real battle over President Bush's education initiatives, because when they start testing the students...and believe me, I'm all for that; I think this is something that needs to be done, and we're way overdue on it. But understand this, that when they start testing the students, they are going to find out that the students are *not all equal*. And that's going to be a problem. It's going to be a problem for some people's self-esteem. It's going to be a problem for some people who do very well but feel guilty because they are doing very well. And know this: Even when they have corrected the schools, improved the programs, educated the teachers, put computers in *all* the classrooms, the students are *still not going to be equal*. Every time a sperm meets an egg, the dice are rolled and the results are *unpredictable*. Smart parents often have smart kids, but every time they roll the dice the outcome will be different. We are *simply not all the same*. And Jesus made this point again, in another place, in another way. In the 19th chapter of Luke, verse 12:

Luke 19

AKJV

¹² He said therefore, A certain nobleman went into a far country to receive for himself a kingdom, and to return.

¹³ And he called his ten servants, and delivered them ten pounds, and said to them, Occupy till I come.

Now, in this case, we're going to start everyone out with equal opportunity. And so, since we're going to give everybody the same shot, we should get equal results then, right? And, presumably, we're giving them out to people with comparable abilities.

Luke 19

AKJV

¹⁴ But his citizens hated him, and sent a message after him, saying, We will not have this man to reign over us.

¹⁵ And it came to pass, that when he was returned, having received the kingdom, then he commanded these servants to be called to him, to whom he had given the money, that he might know how much every man had gained by trading.

¹⁶ Then came the first, saying, Lord, your pound has gained ten pounds.

¹⁷ And he said to him, Well, you good servant: because you have been faithful in a very little, have you authority over ten cities.

¹⁸ And the second came, saying, Lord, your pound has gained five pounds.

¹⁹ And he said likewise to him, Be you also over five cities.

Now, I think this is fascinating, because in this case we start out with everything being equal in the first place. We get *unequal* results. And what's *really* interesting is: God gives them very unequal responsibilities, opportunities (shall we say, rewards) as a result of what they have done.

Luke 19

AKJV

²⁰ And another came, saying, Lord, behold, here is your pound, which I have kept laid up in a napkin:

²¹ For I feared you, because you are an austere man: you take up that you layed not down, and reap that you did not sow.

²² And he said to him, Out of your own mouth will I judge you, you wicked servant. You knew that I was an austere man, taking up that I laid not down, and reaping that I did not sow:

²³ Why then gave not you my money into the bank, that at my coming I might have required my own with usury?

Now, I know you can sit here and say, "Well, look Lord, you didn't *lose* anything at least." No, you're wrong. He lost the *time value* of his money, which is what interest is all about. At the *very least*, his lord should have had the time value of his money, but he didn't do anything.

Luke 19

AKJV

²⁴ And he said to them that stood by, Take from him the pound, and give it to him that has ten pounds.

²⁵ (And they said to him, Lord, he has ten pounds.) [*"He's already got 10 pounds. That's not fair!"*]

²⁶ For I say to you, That to every one which has shall be given; and from him that has not, even that he has shall be taken away from him.

“It’s not fair.” Well, it’s not fair until you stop to understand whose money we’re talking about. If you put your money—your investment capital—with, say, three or four different advisors, and a couple of these advisors make you 10 times your original investment, or five times your original investment, and this one guy over here just gives you your money back, with whom are you going to invest that money that just came back to you? Are you going to give it back to him again? Or are you going to put it with the guy who got the best results? But you see, the lesson of the parable is: We just don’t get equality of results in *real life*, and the only way you can impose this equality of results is by coercion. The message is that no matter how little you think you have been given, you are expected to make the most of it.

Life is very much like a lottery. I know this makes us uncomfortable to think about it, but it’s true. Talent, intelligence, ability—even genius—are sprinkled around from God’s salt shaker with *total abandon*. One of my favorite movies of all time is the movie *Amadeus*, which was a real *classic* in its message. The truth is that Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart was a *vulgar* and *common* man. The lottery of life bestowed upon this low-life an *incredible* genius of music that we enjoy *to this day*. And around him swirled people who were, by all accounts, better people: people who worked harder; musicians who were more personally deserving of success, you might say, if you measure moral character, hard work, and so forth. But never mind all that; Mozart was the *genius*. Now, why do you suppose God made the world this way instead of some other way? Well, according to Jesus’ parables, it is all a test; and it tests two *major* things. First, it tests what we’re going to *do* with what we have been given with a view to giving us even greater responsibility *later* (and something that not many theologies seem to really acknowledge); and second, it tests how we are going to treat one another; because right after the Parable of the Talents, Jesus went on to tell us something even more sobering about the kingdom of heaven. He says in Matthew 25, verse 31,

Matthew 25

AKJV

³¹ When the Son of man shall come in his glory, and all the holy angels with him, then shall he sit on the throne of his glory:

³² And before him shall be gathered all nations: and he shall separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats:

³³ And he shall set the sheep on his right hand, but the goats on the left.

³⁴ Then shall the King say to them on his right hand, Come, you blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world:

You know, this point in time that we have come to in this parable is comparable roughly to the time when the master comes back and decides to find out what the people who had the pounds or the talents had actually *done* with them. We’re in, basically, that situation right here. He comes to them and says,

Matthew 25

KJ2000

³⁴ [...] Come, you blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world:

³⁵ For I was hungry, and you gave me food: I was thirsty, and you gave me drink: I was a stranger, and you took me in [*off the street and let me sleep in your guest bedroom*]:

³⁶ Naked, and you clothed me: I was sick, and you visited me: I was in prison, and you came unto me.

³⁷ Then shall the righteous [*look puzzled and*] answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we you hungry, and fed you? or thirsty, and gave you drink?

38 When saw we you a stranger, and took you in? or naked, and clothed you? [*I don't remember your being cold and giving you a coat.*]

39 Or when saw we you sick, or in prison, and came unto you? [*I don't understand.*]

40 And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, Since you have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, you have done it unto me.

What he's saying here is truly astonishing—that it has very much to do with the way we treat one another; because what he is talking about... There's an expression that I used to hear a lot in our language (I don't seem to hear it as much as I used to hear it) when people would talk about people "less fortunate" than themselves. In other words, "I want to do a little something for people who are less fortunate than I am." Which means, basically, I've managed to acquire a certain amount of money, I've done well in the world, I want to do something for people who *haven't been so lucky*. Is it possible that we have forgotten what a role in our life *sheer luck* has played: that life's lottery has bestowed upon us; that we were born in the right place, at the right time, to the right people; that we had all kinds of opportunities; that we had a natural or native intelligence? And here we stand, with the results of life's lottery in our hands, and we're being tested on two things: What are we going to do with what we have been given? And how are we going to treat one another? The last half of this parable is the reverse of what we just heard.

Matthew 25

AKJV

41 Then shall he say also unto them on the left hand, Depart from me, you cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels:

Why!? What did they do to deserve that? He said,

Matthew 25

AKJV

42 For I was hungry, and you gave me no food: I was thirsty, and you gave me no drink:

43 I was a stranger, and you took me not in [*You didn't give me a break.*]: naked, and you clothed me not: sick, and in prison, and you visited me not.

44 Then shall they also answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we you hungry, or thirsty or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and did not minister unto you?

45 Then shall he answer them, saying, Verily I say unto you, Since you did it not to one of the least of these, you did it not to me.

You know, it's true enough that a person can be sick, in prison, naked, hungry, and cold through his own negligence and his own laziness; but, you know, it's also possible that a man could just have been *dealt a bad hand*. The challenge to those who have the power to do something about it is to realize that we have no business judging, only helping, because that's what *winners* do.

Until next time, I'm Ronald Dart.