

## Heaven's Secret's: Faithfulness

Hector was not a good basketball player. He was a great kid, and he wanted to be a great basketball player. In his mind, like that of so many high school athletes, he was the next Michael Jordan. He wasn't. But Hector was 6 feet tall, which made him about 6 inches taller than his teammates, so I was highly motivated as his coach to make Hector into a basketball player.

If you know the movie *Bad News Bears* and its cast of an odd-looking assortment of baseball wannabe's, that was my team, with most of my 5'7" players hailing from places like Viet Nam and South Korea where soccer, not basketball, was the preferred sport of kids. And then we had Hector, from Chicago's South Side.

Hector, as I said, was big. He couldn't move too well, so I told him to just stand near the basket, hoping that in the act of rebounding the ball he would get fouled. That meant I had to teach Hector how to shoot free throws. Hector had managed at one point in his life to make one free throw with some unorthodox style of shot and he was not going to let me change his championship form.

After a few games of missing every free throw he let me teach him. And then he had to practice. And practice. And practice. Then in one of his last games

we were, to the shock of everyone in the gym, in a position where we could actually get one of our two wins for that season. Hector was fouled with time running out on the clock. He stepped to the line, absolutely confident, well...full of anxious hope anyway...that he could make the free throw that would get us the win. Finally, he was ready to take his shot...

That's what Jesus wants to coach you to be ready for...ready to take a shot when it really matters. Jesus is talking to his disciples and he is telling them the kingdom of heaven, which is the goal of life, to be there now and forever, right?; he is telling them that the kingdom of heaven we are all striving for is a like a man who has all the wealth in the world planning to take a long, long trip.

But he wants his kingdom to continue to grow while he is gone. So, he says to his servants, "I am giving you a share of my wealth. I entrust it to you; use it to grow my kingdom. When I come back, whenever that is, I will enjoy hearing how you used it to produce results for me."

That's where we are now in life, friends. God has entrusted us with his wealth of talents, and he is watching what we do with all that he has given us. Now, we have a choice, to put that which he has given us as trustees to work for the good of the kingdom or bury it in the ground. What this story is telling us is

that it doesn't matter how much you are given, the point is that God has entrusted you with his talents, entrusted with God's golden gifts.

As Matthew Henry notes, we are not called to account for that which we have not received, but only for as much as we have received, been entrusted with.

It doesn't matter if you are Michael Jordan, Kobe Bryant or Lebron, 'King James', or Hector. You are given some level of talent to score points in the kingdom of heaven, but as a servant of Jesus, as a member of the team, you are called to use your talent, your gift, faithfully practicing your service. You can't score any points for the kingdom team if you don't at least try to learn to shoot the ball.

Now, you can pick up the ball and learn how to use it, preparing to help win the contest over souls, fought between the forces of good and evil; or you can put what Jesus has given you in the corner of the garage and let it go flat and become unusable.

Maybe you played an instrument as a kid and then stopped. I played the French horn and accordion as a young student, but if I had to play today, I doubt I

could produce one note. I stopped practicing. “Use it or lose it”, right? It’s the same with the wealth God has given us to put into use for his kingdom.

We have learned in this series that the subjects God welcomes into God’s kingdom of heaven are forgiving, generous, grateful, humble people. Now it falls to us to actually *practice* being forgiving, generous, grateful, humble people.

The point of this parable is that Jesus is coming back one day, and he will be asking what we have done with the grace and mercy and love he gave us. Did we spend our days spreading the love and light of God in a mean and dark world or did we bury it in the ground?

The master does come back and there are two kinds of reactions. One from the servants who knew that the master was gracious and generous and loving, so they lived their lives with abandon. They shot up the ball without worrying about whether they were going to make every shot. They were just having a ball being in the game.

These faithful ones had different levels of talents entrusted to them. But did you notice that all those who were faithful in practicing their faith, they each heard the most wonderful words we could ever hope to hear, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant!’

But it not just a pat on back, no, what the master says next is the real key to understanding the story: 'Come and share your master's happiness.'

What is the secret to happiness in the kingdom of heaven? Faithfulness. Faithful service. Faithfully loving God and our neighbors. Faithfully striving to care for the widows and the poor, faithfully showing compassion to the hurting and the lonely, faithfully showing mercy and grace to our enemies.

You see, it doesn't matter to God how many free throws you make in the game. All God wants to see, as your coach, is that you are practicing putting into use that with which God has blessed you, preparing to take the shots when they most matter.

The lesson of the third servant in this story, the one that gets the master so upset, is not that he lost the master's money or that he was a bad investor. What was so disappointing was that he never even tried to score one single point for the kingdom of heaven's team. He just sat in the bleachers, never even trying to use the master's treasure to which he alone had been entrusted.

The joy, the happiness of the kingdom of heaven comes to those who were faithful in serving. To those who put into practice the treasure the master gave them, they were given more. So it will be for us in heaven. Heaven will be a place,

it is a place, where we are given opportunities to win souls for God, because that, after all, is the purpose of our being left behind while the master is away.

I am asked often, 'What is the purpose of my life? I don't feel like there is anything God has for me to do?' What Jesus tells us in this story is this: if you want to do some great thing for Jesus, start by practicing your free throws. Then, one day, perhaps you will be given the chance at the winning shot.

What gift has God given you? What is the talent you have been blessed with? If you don't know, let's talk about it. Seriously, I can help you discover the gift that God has entrusted to you. That is the best part of coaching this team.

You are all superstars in the making! Stars waiting to shine in the universe.

Just like Hector. Hector stood there. Looking at that basket 15 feet away, ten feet high. It probably looked impossibly far and high, but he had been practicing and practicing for just this moment. He took his first shot, and it missed the rim and everything else.

So, I shouted to Hector the words I always shout when I want them to think about anything other than how to shoot the ball, "Bend your knees, Hector! Knees, knees."

So, Hector takes the ball from the ref and puts his hand on it just so, and if he doesn't bend his knees deep. He releases the ball, and if a gym could hold its breath, that moment it did. And the ball arcs high and true, finally going 'Swish!'

The smile on Hector's face, the joy his teammates expressed, that made all that practice suddenly worth every minute.

John Calvin writes that "no manner of life is more praiseworthy in the sight of God, than that which yields some advantage to human society." What God rewards is not success, but faithfulness. Still, sometimes, you will succeed. Then, as Matthew Henry observes, we will know happiness. "The state of the blessed is a state of joy.... (T)he joy of the redeemed, bought with the sorrow of the Redeemer."

The secret to kingdom happiness is to be faithful in multiplying God's gift of grace in and through our service.

The Coach is giving you the opportunity to take a shot that can win the contest for someone's soul.

Start practicing. Faithfully.

*That's* the secret to heaven's happiness.