

Dear brothers and sisters, what time is it? What are these times that we find ourselves living through here at the close of 2008?

What is the story of our times? Many would say that it is a time of fear.

Daily we watch the stock market plummet, recover a tad, and dive again and with it we watch retirement funds and life savings and college funds precipitously fall. Some in our community will end up working longer than they had originally planned to recover from their losses.

Some have lost jobs. Others know they are not out of the woods when it comes to job security. The fears of our time are real.

Our time is an anxious one.

For us as Good Shepherd what time is it? For us it is time to celebrate 25 years of ministry guided by God's hands. For us it is three weeks until our annual meeting and the congregation approving a spending plan for 2009.

For us it is a time of trying to do all that we feel God calling us to do when people are giving less to support the ministry.

For children with long Christmas lists and their parents what time is it?

I hate to even mention that the time is less than 6 weeks to Christmas and counting.

For the people of Zimbabwe, what time is it? It is the beginning of the rainy season. It is the time to bury seed in the ground. It is the time to hope and pray. It is the time for hungry mouths to be fed.

What time is it people of God? What is the story of our times?

We live in the in between time. Our master has come and he has entrusted us each with some of his property. To one he has given 5 talents. To another 2 talents; To another, one talent. Each of them is a large sum.

We have to choose what we are going to do with what we have been given.

If we make good choices, our master will delight in us & what we have done when he returns. We will enter into his joy. And our Lord will entrust us with even more of his treasure. If we handle what we have been given poorly, then our Lord will be disappointed and we will potentially lose what we have been given.

Now you might rightfully ask, "What are these talents that I have been given?"

In this parable the talents represent everything that you and I have been given by God. This includes your skills and abilities, your income,

the people in your life, your health, and your possessions.

At this time, I ask the ushers to hand out to everyone a worksheet.

All these things are gifts from God. Whether you have 5 talents or 2 or 1 in any of these particular areas, you have been entrusted with this gift from God. There is nothing that you will write on this sheet that you can claim as your own property and therefore do with it exactly as you please.

This is property that has been entrusted to you by God. As Christians, our ultimate goal is to please God with all that we have given and to long for the things that God wants. So as we move through these different headings the two questions at the top of the sheet apply to every item: Is what I am doing with these gifts pleasing to God? And Does it allow God to grow his kingdom through me?

So from the top, please list there three of your skills in the first table. You may have a knack for numbers or excellent people skills.

It may be your ability to teach or listen or your compassion, but write down what comes to mind. Your skills are gifts that God has given you.

You may have developed them some with your own effort, but God gave you ability in that area initially on which you have built. Think about how you are

or are not using that gift presently in your life. How can you use that gift for the sake of others? How could use that gift in a way that would bring God joy? You may need more time to think and pray through this, but God has given you the talents you have listed for a reason. How can you use them to glorify him?

Next is the area of money. If you receive a paycheck every month or a weekly allowance or are living off your pension, this money and the ability to support yourself comes from God. God has given you your job and the ability to work. 100% of your income and mine belongs to God. Underneath your income write down what you offer back to God.

This is the money that funds God's work through the church.

We offer this to God acknowledging all the blessings we receive.

We give it in response, out of thanks for all that Jesus has done for us.

We give it so that through our congregation we can teach the faith and reach out in love to spread God's kingdom.

I encourage you to do the math and figure out what percentage of your income you are presently giving back to God. Make it a goal to raise that amount

by 1 or 2% for this next year. Giving is a spiritual matter. As I have grown in my giving and have learned how to tithe, I have grown to trust God more and have learned the joy of giving to things that God deeply cares about. I encourage you to be intentional in your giving. Make it a priority out of your own desire to please God & to make a difference in God's world.

In the area of relationships write down seven of the people God has placed in your life. These people are gifts to you. They along with others are within your circle of influence. What is going well in your relationships with them How could they improve? How could our Lord be calling you to care And reach out to them in ways that would help them see Jesus more clearly? None of these relationships are accidental. God wants to work through you to grow his kingdom and share his love. What would that look like in the interaction you have with these seven people?

Our gifts also include our bodies and our physical health. After all our bodies are holy temples in which God dwells. Therefore we honor God by how we care for our bodies and by keeping them in better health, we are better able to serve our Lord. Take time to note how well you are taking care of this temple which you have been given.

And finally, there are the things that we have already bought, our prized possessions. The Scriptures do warn us about storing up treasures here on earth. The house we live in, the car we drive, our ipod, our game system, our boat...I don't know what you may have put on your list. There are most likely items on my list and yours that we need to question why we have them. Is it purely selfish for us to have these possessions? Maybe yes; maybe no. It all depends on how you use it. Having a large house can be a gift used by God if your house is a place where you welcome others in and they feel loved. Even your ipod could serve a greater purpose if listening to it allows you to calm your crazed mind and rest with God; But if we value our possessions more than God than we are misusing these gifts.

How will we use our possessions we have been given?

What time is it people of God? What time is it in between receiving gifts from God and our accounting for what we have done with them?

Is it time for fear? Is it time to circle the wagons and hold on to what we have?

Is it time to only take care of ourselves and hope that someone else will look after the poor, the hungry and the hurting?

Is it time to safely bury our treasure in the ground or will we invest it?

This is the time for us to be the church. Into this climate of fear and anxiety, we have the truth that this world needs. The market, jobs, and 401ks can fail, but there is a God enthroned in the heavens who will never fail us and will always provide. This is the time for us to trust what we believe. This is the time for the church to look to the God who has been our help in ages past and will be our hope for years to come.

This is the time for us to be the church; To not turn inward out of fear of what tomorrow will bring but to open our doors wide for those on the verge of losing hope. This is the time for us to support our ministries here at Good Shepherd the most for as the community of north Raleigh around us struggles more and more, we will need to be a place of light and hope for those who are gripped by fear and despair. North Raleigh will need our Stephen Ministers to listen and care. People will need to network and find understanding in our Unemployment Support Group.

People will need to come here to worship and pray and hear God's promises of comfort and protection.

This is the time for us to be the church; the rainy season is beginning in Zimbabwe and our brothers and sisters there need seed to grow their crops and feed the hungry. \$500 will provide a household of 5 the food, the seed, the fertilizer they need to live for 4 months. Any amount we give will help save many, many lives.

It is less than six weeks to Christmas. How many of you children, or youth, or even adults have already written up your list of what you want for Christmas? As you think about all the stuff on your list, how many of those things do you actually need? Would you be willing to take some of those items off your list and instead give that money to help feed our brothers and sisters in Zimbabwe? As families I encourage you to sit down and discuss this and see what God leads you to do.

This is an opportunity to sacrifice for a good cause and also know the joy of giving and truly helping people in need.

This is our time to be the church. It is our time to take the many gifts that we have been given and use them to bring joy to our Lord and accomplish what he longs for For our master will come back one day. And Jesus will want an account of what we have done with all that we have been given. This is not the time to bury our talent in the ground.

We must keep our ministries at Good Shepherd strong.

We cannot turn a deaf ear to the community around us.

And we cannot neglect the needs of our brothers and sisters in Zimbabwe.
As Bishop Moyo reminded us, “If one of us suffers, all of us suffer.”

This is our time to be the church. As we use our many gifts to please God,
may we trust that we will be taken care of ourselves and hear our Lord say to us,
“Well done, good and trustworthy servant. Enter into my joy.”