

A Full Napkin and an Empty Basket

by Carter Conlon

Carter Conlon's sermon challenges believers to actively use their God-given talents to bear fruit for His Kingdom rather than hiding them away in fear or complacency.

Duration: 39:43

Scripture: Matthew 25:19

Topics: "Christian Life"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher emphasizes the importance of not being shallow-focused in our pursuit of knowledge and understanding of Christ. He refers to Ephesians 4:8, which speaks of Jesus ascending to heaven and giving gifts to men. The preacher then delves into the parable of the talents in Matthew 25, where a man gives his servants different amounts of money to invest. The servants who multiplied their talents were commended, while the one who buried his talent was rebuked. The sermon concludes with a reminder that Jesus is coming soon and we will be held accountable for how we have used the gifts and opportunities given to us.

Transcript

Good morning, Times Square Church. God bless you. I hope you're having a good week.

And if not a good week, at least you feel refreshed in the presence of the Lord this morning. I'd like to speak to you this morning, a message called a full napkin and an empty basket. If you'll go to Matthew chapter 25, please, with me.

A portion of scripture when Jesus is talking about a day that's coming upon us very, very shortly. Now, Father, I thank you, Lord God Almighty, for the power and the presence of the Holy Spirit. Lord, without your anointing, even your word, Lord, doesn't really find a lodging place in us.

We are capable of deflecting it until you anoint it. And I pray, God, that you just literally penetrate every shield, every defense, everything that we have built up to avoid looking at some of these truths. Give me grace and tenderness to speak this.

Lord, I am aware of my own frailty. I ask you, Father, for the touch of heaven. God, give us ears to hear.

We ask it in Jesus' name. A full napkin and an empty basket. Matthew chapter 25, beginning at verse 14.

For the kingdom of heaven is as a man traveling into a far country who called his own servants and delivered unto them his goods. Unto one he gave five talents. Now, these are currency.

To another, two. To another, one. To every man according to several ability and straightway took his journey.

Then he that had received the five talents went and traded with the same and made them other five talents. And likewise, he that had received two, he also gained another two. But he that had received one went and digged in the earth and hid his Lord's money.

And after a long time, the Lord of those servants cometh and reckoneth with them. And so he that had received five talents came and brought other five talents, saying, Lord, thou deliverest unto me five talents. Behold, I have gained besides them five talents more.

His Lord said unto him, Well done, thou good and faithful servant. Thou hast been faithful over a few things. I will make thee ruler over many things.

Enter thou into the joy of thy Lord. He also that had received two talents came and said, Lord, thou deliverest unto me two talents. Behold, I've gained two other talents beside them.

His Lord said unto him, Well done, good and faithful servant. Thou hast been faithful over a few things. I will make thee ruler over many things.

Enter thou into the joy of thy Lord. Then he which had received the one talent came and said, Lord, I knew thee that thou art a hard man, reaping where thou hast not sown and gathering where thou hast not strawed. And I was afraid and went and hid thy talent in the earth.

And lo, here thou hast that is thine. His Lord answered and said unto him, Thou wicked and slothful servant, thou knewest that I reap where I sowed not and gather where I have not strawed. Thou oughtest therefore to have put my money to the exchangers.

And then at my coming, I should have received my own with usury, or that would mean interest. Take therefore the talent from him and give it to him which has 10 talents. For unto every one that has shall be given, and he shall have abundance.

But from him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he has. And cast ye the unprofitable servant into outer darkness, there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth." Now, the Apostle Paul tells us conclusively in 2 Timothy chapter 3, verses 5 and 7, that a religion which professes to be Christianity will become somewhat prevalent in the last days. It will be embraced by some, hopefully not by too many.

But it has within it no power to further the true work of God on the earth. He actually encourages us to turn away from it. It's characterized by a seeming, it has a seeming thirst for knowledge.

Paul says, ever learning, but never coming to the knowledge of the truth. Always learning, but never being brought to the place where that learning is supposed to bring us. It's shallow focused.

Its pursuit never leads its followers to where the truth of Christ and the cross will always lead us. And if ever I feel a cry in my heart, I feel it in this hour that we are living in, turn away from everything in Christ that is shallow focused. Every form of knowledge that does not lead you and I to what I'm about to speak on this morning.

Now, Ephesians 4, 8 tells us that when he, that being Jesus, ascended up on high, he led captivity captive and gave gifts unto men. So, this is in effect where the parable of our opening text begins. Verse 14, he says, for the kingdom of heaven is as a man.

Now, keep in mind, this is Jesus. He's talking about himself. He's talking about his coming to the earth, dying on a cross, having a church through whom he would continue to extend a hand of mercy and the knowledge of God throughout the earth until he returns.

It's just, it's not even debatable. The kingdom of heaven is as a man traveling to a far country who called his own servants and delivered unto them his goods. He took captivity captive, Paul says, and gave gifts unto men.

In Matthew 28, just before he ascended back to the throne at the right side of his father, he said, all power is given to me in heaven and in earth. Go, therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the father and of the son and of the Holy Ghost. In other words, bringing them into the love of the father, the forgiveness of the son, and the power of the Holy Spirit to live a new life, which God promises to all who turn to him.

Teach them to observe all things whatsoever I've commanded you. And lo, I'm with you always, even to the end of the world. In other words, I've, I've commanded you to follow me as I've followed the will of my father.

As my father sent me, he said to his disciples, so I send you. I'm sending you out into this world to bear witness of the love of God, the forgiveness of God, the power of God. You are to bear witness.

And I'm not sending you out alone. He told them, I want you to tarry in Jerusalem until the Holy Spirit comes to you and you are given the power to do these things. You're, that's the deposit.

Folks, that's, those are the talents. That's the, it's a currency in this particular parable in Matthew. It's, it's talents is a deposit.

It's the coinage of God. May I call it that? It's the enablement of God to do the very things that we're called to do. In verse 15, it says, he gave one, five talents to another two and to another one, every man, according to his several ability and straightway took his journey.

Now, this is the deposit of his own life. He gives us the exact measure that each of us needs to accomplish that which we are called to do. That's why it says according to his several ability.

Now, quite often people have looked at this and said, you know, the five talent people are the preachers or the evangelist or the teachers and the two talent people are, and it's such a mediocre understanding of what he's talking about. It's not nothing to do with high profile. I might need one talent to do what I do, but you might need five deposits of God's strength to live in the family that you're living in right now, to work at the job you work at, to be in the neighborhood you're in.

It's got nothing to do with high profile. It's got nothing to do with people that are seen. In other words, he says, I put within you the deposit of my life that you need to bear fruit where you are.

And folks, when we get to heaven, this is going to become so plain and so clear. We're going to see that we were so shallow in some of our thinking that we ought, we had a view, which is not much different from

corporate America and the church of Jesus Christ. We had it all backwards.

No, you might be a five talent Christian, and I'm telling you, your name is never going to be known on the earth, but you are known in hell and in heaven because you are standing for the truth of God. Now we're called to bring all people to Christ. We're called to tell everyone that God loves them, that he wants to forgive them and not judge them, that he has a divine purpose for every life.

Every life counts. Every life is important to God. And he's willing to give all men the power to accomplish what he's called them to do.

That's the gospel of Jesus Christ, folks. It's not any more complicated than that. And teaching them means making disciples, bringing them into this knowledge and saying, now, as I have brought to you the deposit of God's life, now I'm going to teach you that God is willing to bring that deposit into you, not for your sake only, but for the sake of others.

There's a work to do on the earth until Christ comes again for us. You know, it's only a play on words, but you might say that the life of Christ in us should create interest in others. Think of the day of Pentecost, when the people outside of the upper room saw this initial deposit of God, God's life, God's power, the ability to think differently, to speak differently, this impassioned heart of God that sent his son to a cross was now deposited in the lives of 120 very ordinary people.

In the courage and in the power of God, and with the love of God, they burst out into a marketplace. I'm personally convinced that most thought they would die shortly after, in a sense, going public with their faith in Christ. But it immediately sparked interest in the crowd who saw this deposit of God.

If I have Christ in me, there should be an interest somewhere in somebody. And this bloodthirsty crowd now is saying, what must we do to be saved? We've seen something in you. There's something of God in you, which our religion has never given us.

And so it's not debatable that this deposit of God's life advanced the kingdom of God. Now, Matthew chapter 25, again, from verses 19 to 23, it tells us that after a long time, the master returned. And I want to tell you, he's coming soon.

Jesus is coming. He's coming for us. You know, we sang about it just now, just as soon as I get home.

And he called each of his servants. That's what is going to happen. There's a moment where we are called to the throne of God.

You will be called and I will be called. We will give an account of what we've done with the investment of God's life within us on the earth. And each of them brought back a proportionate measure of fruit with respect to what he had given them.

It's that simple. You gave me the power to stand in my college and I stood by the grace of God. I didn't cower down among the secular arguments and the scorning of those who despise their own redemption.

I didn't bend, but I stood in the love of God. It wasn't an obstinacy. It was not pride.

It was motivated by love. I had the love of God in my heart. I knew God loved all people.

I knew God sent his son to forgive. I knew God was willing to give the Holy Spirit to bring people, every person into this divine enablement of God from the highest to the lowest, from the most educated to the least educated, from the most advantaged to the least advantaged. It made no difference to God.

He was willing to be fair and equal with all men. These stand at the throne of God and say, I invested what you gave me exactly as you suggested I should. I found it to be exactly the right amount and it brought increase to your kingdom just as you told me it would.

God will never ask you to do something that he does not give you the supply to do it. If he asked you to stand, stand and then trust him to fill your mouth. Even to his own church, he said, you're going to be brought before kings and authorities.

And he said, don't even premeditate what you're going to say. He said, stand up. I'll give you a mouth and wisdom that nobody can stand against.

And there will be a testimony of those who by faith did the work of God and say, Lord, it was exactly the way you said it was going to be. I stood and you didn't fail me. I believed for my family and my family came through.

I stood, oh God. And I was a testimony of your life in the midst of a place of people that seemed to be so grossly indifferent to even their own redemption. And yet with the measure of strength you give me, Lord, there was a measure of fruit that came into your kingdom because of it.

And this will be the testimony of many. Heaven will rejoice. They'll be shouting.

I believe among the angels. When the least of us appear at the throne and say, God, I invested into your work, which is the redemption, which is the saving of lost people. I invested the life you put in me into this work that is your work in the earth.

And by the grace of God, there was fruit in proportion to the strength and the calling there was fruit. But now there's another man, the third man who appears at the throne. And he was another type of a man who was given what he needed for his time.

I couldn't help but reading that, but thinking when I was reading this, and it's only my own thought in this, but is it possible that this third man is our generation? You know, you think of those that had to go through the Roman arena and persecution, they had to suffer. You read the book of Hebrews. They wandered in dens and caves, even the old Testament saints.

And there was a measure of strength given to the early church to get through the time they needed to get through. But at the last days that we're living in, and Paul says there's going to be a more or less a light religion will be embraced by many people. And it's a type of a man who was given what he needed for his time.

Maybe it was a time of having to endure less hardship. It was a time of relative ease where Christianity was at least moderately accepted. People weren't dying in the arena for believing in Christ.

They're not hanging on crosses. Oh, yes, there's a snickering and there's a bit of scorn, but it's not as hard a time as many others have had to go through. This man did a curious thing.

He took what was given to him and he buried it in the earth. You know, when you read it, he says, I took it and I went and hid it in the earth. Now Luke chapter 19, which is Luke's account of a very similar story.

It might even be the same story written in a different account. It says that the man who was given this measure of currency buried it in a napkin or folded it, not buried, but folded it in a napkin. I want to suggest to you that perhaps this is one in the same story.

You may disagree with that, but it possibly is. And maybe he just did both. Maybe he took this incredible life, this incredible deposit, this currency of heaven really is what it is.

And he saw it. He cherished it. He folded it in a napkin and maybe buried it, maybe buried it in a waterproof box.

And he put it out in his backyard. And on Sunday morning, he would dig it up. He would carefully wrap it in a leather case to protect it from the elements.

And he would casually stroll by those that are robbed and left for dead as he went to church to learn some new thing about God. Always learning, he could say. I'm always learning.

You know what? That was what was in his heart. He probably wasn't brazen enough to say it on the way to church, but as people passed by, stripped of the righteousness of God, wounded in their heart from experiences in life, left for dead in some cases, he could say, I'm learning about God. Always learning.

Thank God I am always learning. Paul said the last days would be characterized by a lust for learning, but that learning never brings many of these people of God to a place that it's supposed to bring them to. And in order to justify his inaction, in order to justify not using this deposit of God's life for the right purpose, he had to develop a theology that explained his lack of putting the life of God in him to good use.

And here's what he said. He said, I knew you were a hard man. Now, when you look at the word in the Greek New Testament, here's what it says.

I knew you were, you were unfeeling. You were harsh. You were inhuman.

I knew you own everything. You gather whatever you want to. You choose what is saved and what is left behind.

It all belongs to you anyway. You have all power. You have all authority.

There are some who even say, as this man said in his heart, you already know who's going to be saved, so what does it matter if I invest the little that I have? And so, I was afraid of you, because I know you're this kind of a man, so I did what I thought I should do. I thought I better preserve the truth you were giving me. You know, there's a whole segment of Christianity that are preservers of truth now.

They don't practice it, but they surely preserve it. They fold it in a napkin. They cherish it.

Once a week, they unfold the little napkin. They take out their new little nuggets of truth, and they say, wow, look at what God showed me this week! Oh, and think of the tragedy of the church of Jesus Christ forsaking this great truth! These things that have been known for generations, and they leave their convention, their little meeting, and they fold it up again in the napkin, and they put it in the box, and then they bury it among their books for another week. I was afraid, so I thought I'd better preserve what you

gave me, and so I preserved it.

He said, I preserved it. Others lost touch with pure theology, but I held to it, and here I present back to you what is yours. I don't think this man understood anything of his position and what he, how he was viewed in the sight of God.

I think he felt he was about to receive a commendation. Well done! Well done, good and faithful servant! You held on to a pure view of this or that particular meaning of a word, or a purpose of a particular theology. You folded it up in your napkin, and so here you are with your folded napkin, but how come your basket is empty? How come? How come? In all your pursuit of truth, it hasn't produced any fruit.

Where are the souls? Where are the widows that have been helped? Where are the orphans that have been fed? Where are the people in prison that have been visited? Where are the wounded that have been healed? Where are the spiritually blind that were given sight? And here's a man standing at the throne of God with a full napkin in an empty basket, and that's all that religion is capable of producing. How shocked he must have been, expecting to be commended, only to be called wicked and lazy. And the Lord said to him, you wicked and lazy servant, you knew this about me, did you? It's actually sarcastic, verse 26.

You knew this about me? You knew that I have all authority and power, and I can reap where I've not sown, and gather where I've not strawed? You knew this, did you? You knew I was a demanding--you know, keep in mind, this is sarcasm, okay? This is not really true. And he said, why didn't you at least give this truth to somebody who would have used it? Why didn't you at least give it to the bank? And they would have gotten some interest out of it, but you didn't generate any interest to the life of my son that I put within you. You generated no interest in the earth.

You see, religion generates no interest whatsoever. It's only life. It's only what is purely God.

It's only what is born of God, carried of God, sustained of God. And he says, why didn't you just at least give it to somebody who would use it? I was thinking about this this morning while I was praying in the back room, and something came into my mind. About four years ago, somebody bought me a chainsaw and gave it to me.

And it's really a nice chainsaw. Apparently it's very powerful, can cut big trees, and it even has a hard shell case that it's come in. But you know, I've never taken it out of the case.

I know where it is. I know where it is, and I know what it can do. I mean, it can cut trees down in a single swoop.

It can make firewood that can keep other people warm. They can put it in a wood stove. They can cook with it.

There's a lot of things it can do. And I know where it is, and I really appreciate the thought and the sentiment behind this man who came to my house and said, I felt to buy this for you. I know exactly where it is.

I even know how it's positioned on the shelf. But I have never taken it out of the case. Now, I know that if I pull the cord, it will most likely start.

But I have a memory in my heart from a long time ago. When I was a young boy, there was somebody cutting wood for my father, and the chainsaw kicked. I don't know if many of you may not understand that, but it was cutting through, and it kicked back, and it hit him in the leg and caught his leg quite severely.

And I still have that. And I think about it every time I look at that chainsaw. Now, do I really want to take it out and run the risk of cutting myself when I can spend \$105 and buy a half-ton truckload of wood? You know, a lot of people read their Bible, and they get to Hebrews 11, and it says, people were sun and two for their faith in God.

And they say, well, rather than go that far, rather than run that risk, why don't I just buy a book about what somebody else did? Why don't I just read the book, and why don't I just accumulate the knowledge of Jonathan Goforth, who went forth, and Hudson Taylor, who went off to China and sacrificed a great deal? Why don't I just get--why don't I just buy a book about somebody who did it? And I could be--couldn't I be warmed by that? Couldn't that give me a good feeling? And couldn't I, you know, tell others that I know what Hudson Taylor did? Why should I have to go to the extreme of actually starting this thing and run the risk of personal harm? And that's what we do, quite often, with the Word of God. We love to come to the house of the Lord. We love the Word of God.

We love the stories. You know, if I brought a missionary in today that's given all and buried half his family on the mission field, most of this church would come weeping to the altar. But sad to say, there might only be a small portion that would actually consider doing the same thing.

You could have at least passed it on to somebody else. I'm under conviction, because I was thinking about my chainsaw this morning. God says, if you're not going to use it, at least give it to somebody who will use it.

Yeah, but it's worth like 400 bucks, you know. And I felt the Lord saying to me, are you ever going to use it? And I can honestly say, probably not. I'm still plagued by the thought of getting cut by this thing.

And why run the risk when you can buy a quarter of wood for \$105? And that's exactly what's going to happen to people. We're going to be called to the throne of God soon, and we're going to give an account for what we have done with what God gave us. He's given you and I a measure of His life to do something He's called us to do.

It all involves people. It involves not lording it over people, not being higher than other people are. It involves giving to other people.

It involves being a blessing. It involves conveying the heart of God that sent His Son to a cross to people. That's what it's all about.

That's the whole gospel of Jesus Christ. And as far as I'm concerned, that's the reason I'm left on the earth. What a brazen accusation to say to Christ, you gather where you've not sown.

What ignorance of the cross. That was no different what this man did than the Roman soldiers did. They spit on him, they slapped his face.

And that kind of a theological perspective is exactly the same as what Rome and the Roman soldiers did to Jesus Christ. What an ignorant thing to say, you gather where you've not sown. In other words, you reap a harvest where you put in no labor.

Think about every drop of blood that came from the veins of the Son of God into the soil, and the brazenness to even declare you reap where you have not sown. What an absence in the heart of the love of God was in this man. What a denial of the presence and power of God within him to win the lost.

And Jesus called him unprofitable to be studying Scripture and never end up with a heart of love. Never end up with anything in the heart that says, oh Jesus, don't let these people perish. It's all just learning then, if it doesn't lead us to the heart of God.

If it doesn't lead us to God becoming a man and dying on the cross for your sin and for mine and for the sins of all who would come to him. Whosoever will, the Scripture says. I know God has the power to do whatever he wants, but in this case, here's the choice he made.

Whosoever will, from the least to the greatest, from the most educated to the least educated, from those who have knowledge of God to those who have no knowledge of God. The gospel message is whosoever will. And the church is the emissary of that message.

God loves you. God died for you. There's a purpose and a supernatural plan for every life that turns to Jesus Christ.

And he's not calling us in our own strength to do it. He's willing to put the deposit of his life within us and give us the power to be everything he's called us to be. By God's grace, I will not be called unprofitable at the throne of God.

I will not be there with a folded napkin of theology and an empty basket of fruit. No, sir. I'd rather have one truth in my heart and a full basket of people who came to Christ because of it.

No, sir. By God's grace, that will not be you and me. And that has to be the cry of your heart and the cry of my heart.

By God's grace, Lord, you have not deposited your life in me in vain. By God's grace, I'm not going to be found with a zillion tapes in my closet and no souls in my basket. By God's grace, the knowledge of Christ is going to bring me into the work of God.

Whatever that work is, it's not my choice. It's God's choice. I want to finish this message by just sharing a song with you.

It was written in 1877 by a pastor. His name was Charles C. Luther. And he was in a church himself and he heard a message about a young man who had been saved only one month.

I don't know the exact circumstance. It would appear from what I read that he was saved on his deathbed, essentially never recovered, never had a chance to do anything for God. And he had a cry in his heart.

And here were his exact words as they were recorded by Charles Luther. He said, I'm not afraid to die. Jesus saves me now.

But must I go empty handed? Must I appear before God with no fruit, with nothing of my hands? And it was a cry. I'm not afraid to die. And I'm going to appear now before the throne.

But must I go to God empty handed? Now, he's a young man who never had a chance. I don't know what his condition was or his disease was. But Charles Luther wrote a song.

He was moved by it. And even though he wasn't a proficient songwriter himself, he went back and he wrote a song called Must I Go Empty Handed? And the song became a camp meeting revival favorite for many, many years to come. And many people were moved into the true service of Jesus Christ through the words of this song.

And so ironically, what happened is that God answered this young man's prayer on his deathbed, and he didn't go empty handed. He left a song because of the cry of his heart. And that song spurred many and still does today throughout the world to get into the real and active service of Jesus Christ.

Here's the chorus. It goes, Must I go empty handed? Must I meet my Savior's soul? Not one soul with which to give him. Must I empty handed go? Must I go empty handed? Thus my dear Redeemer meet.

Not one day of service give him. Lay no trophy at his feet. Must I go empty handed? Must I meet my Savior's soul? Not one soul with which to greet him.

Must I empty handed go? Not at death I shrink or falter. For my Savior saves me now. But to meet him empty handed.

Thoughts of that now cloud my brow. Must I go empty handed? Must I meet my Savior's soul? Not one soul with which to greet him. Must I empty handed go? Oh, the years of sinning wasted.

Could I but recall them now. I would give them all to my Savior. At his feet I'd gladly bow.

Must I go empty handed? Must I meet my Savior's soul? Not one soul with which to greet him. Must I empty handed go? Oh, you saints, arise, be earnest. Up and work while yet tis day.

E'er the night of death overtake thee. Strive for souls while still ye may. Must I go empty handed? Must I meet my Savior's soul? Not one soul with which to greet him.

Must I empty handed go? Oh, must I go empty handed? Must I meet my Savior's soul? Not one soul with which to greet him. Must I empty handed go? My altar call this morning is very simple. Not me.

No sir, not me. I'm going to the throne of God. And yes, I'll have truth in one hand, but there'll be fruit in the other.

I'm not going to the throne of God empty handed. There's absolutely no way. And it involves a prayer.

Lord, deposit in me the strength I need to be a living witness where I am. Instead of trying to get out of your work environment, say, Lord God, deposit in me the strength to be a witness of Christ. Deposit in me the grace in my home that I need, among my family, especially Thanksgiving coming up next week.

And you and I know what those family gatherings sometimes can be like. God, give me the grace. I'm not going to the throne with an empty basket.

There has to be something. Get into the heart. There's got to be a determination that gets into you and gets into me.

And that's my altar call today. It begins with a determination, my brother, my sister. That's where it starts.

You let God work the rest out, but it starts with a determination. I'm not just going to come to church and learn and not have it put to any use. This is about people.

This is about the work of God in the earth. This is about the redemption of the lost. I'm not going, not me.

I'm not going empty handed. Let your cry be like this young man on his deathbed, and God will do something supernatural in your life. I can promise you that.

Let's stand. And as we do, I want to ask you to come forward, those who really, this is the cry of your heart this morning. And in the annex, you step between the screens and Roxbury as well, and other locations, just get up and just stand.

If you're in your living room watching this today, and we're going to worship for a little while, and we're going to believe God for the miraculous. Not one soul with which to grieve, must I empty handed. Must I go and empty handed.

Must I meet my Savior's soul. Not one soul with which to make it, must I empty handed go. So just lift your hands, please, those that have responded today.

Lord, thank you for the deposit of your life that each of us needs to do what you've called us to do, where you've called us to stand and where you've called us to live, where you've called us to go. It all is yours, Lord. And when this journey is over, we want to bring it back to you with rejoicing.

We want to bring it back to you and say, Lord, you did not waste your resources on me. Father, thank you, Lord God, that you're going to do marvelous things, Lord, through those whose hearts are open in this time. Father, make us aware of your supernatural presence in our lives every day.

Make us aware of the strength that is not our own. Compassion that is deeper than anything we have. Vision that doesn't come from what we naturally see.

Make us aware of your life inside of ours. And Father, we thank you for it with everything in us, in Jesus' name. Amen.

Hallelujah. I tell you, it's at altars like this today that missionaries are born. True witnesses of Christ come to life.

Thank God. Thank God.

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