

Scripture for Sunday Nov 15 2020

Matthew 25:14-30 (NIV)

¹⁴ “Again, it will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted his wealth to them. ¹⁵ To one he gave five bags of gold, to another two bags, and to another one bag, each according to his ability. Then he went on his journey. ¹⁶ The man who had received five bags of gold went at once and put his money to work and gained five bags more. ¹⁷ So also, the one with two bags of gold gained two more. ¹⁸ But the man who had received one bag went off, dug a hole in the ground and hid his master’s money. ¹⁹ “After a long time the master of those servants returned and settled accounts with them. ²⁰ The man who had received five bags of gold brought the other five. ‘Master,’ he said, ‘you entrusted me with five bags of gold. See, I have gained five more.’ ²¹ “His master replied, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master’s happiness!’ ²² “The man with two bags of gold also came. ‘Master,’ he said, ‘you entrusted me with two bags of gold; see, I have gained two more.’ ²³ “His master replied, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master’s happiness!’ ²⁴ “Then the man who had received one bag of gold came. ‘Master,’ he said, ‘I knew that you are a hard man, harvesting where you have not sown and gathering where you have not scattered seed. ²⁵ So I was afraid and went out and hid your gold in the ground. See, here is what belongs to you.’ ²⁶ “His master replied, ‘You wicked, lazy servant! So you knew that I harvest where I have not sown and gather where I have not scattered seed? ²⁷ Well then, you should have put my money on deposit with the bankers, so that when I returned I would have received it back with interest. ²⁸ “So take the bag of gold from him and give it to the one who has ten bags. ²⁹ For whoever has will be given more, and they will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them. ³⁰ And throw that worthless servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’

Sermon: A Generous Master and the Fearful Servant

The Lectionary reading for today is the so-called “Parable of the Talents.”¹ Indeed, the word “talent,” meaning “God-given abilities or skills,” has entered the English language *because* of this parable. In Jesus’ day, however, a “talent” corresponded to a weight on a balance scale, which was typically counterbalanced by silver. The worth of just *one* talent of silver corresponded to a laborer’s salary for 15 years; now that’s a lot of money for a master to give his servant! The “Parable of the Talents,” as we will see, is misnamed. It’s *not* the money that should be the focus of our attention, but the generous master and the response of the third servant. I want to address three questions today: First, what might those who *heard* Jesus make of his parable? Second, what would Matthew’s *readers* make of the story? And third, what are *we* to make of this parable today? But let’s begin by briefly outlining the story.

A master, who is about to go on a long journey, summons three of his servants and gives them each a vast quantity of money in accordance with their *ability*. They have *not earned* that money; it is a *gift*. The master then leaves on a trip and, after a long period of time, he returns to settle accounts with his servants. Two servants demonstrate their *trustworthiness* by doubling their allotted money through hard work and being willing to take risks. The master’s praise for them is identical and they both are welcomed into the “joy of their master.” This suggests that it is *not* the *amount* of talents that is the issue but about the servants’ *attitude* and that they *do* with what they are given. That said, the parable’s emphasis is really on the relationship between the master and the third servant who receives just one talent - which is still a lot of money! Matthew tells us that this servant cautiously buries the money in the ground out of *fear* of his master, who *he* perceives to be harsh and exacting. The servant then returns it intact to his “lord.”² The master, perhaps surprisingly – and even harshly, rebukes the servant for being “wicked and lazy,” and then asks him why he didn’t at least put the money in the bank where it could have earned interest? He then takes the man’s talent and gives it to the one who has the most, adding the well-known phrase, “To all those who have, more will be given . . .”³ – which, I confess, seems a very contemporary truism! Then, in contrast to the other two servants, this man is barred from entering into “the joy of the Lord,” meaning being excluded from the messianic banquet.

So, what would those who *heard* Jesus telling the story have understood by his parable?

In Jesus’ day it would have likely been seen as a story about God, who is the master, and Israel. In particular, it is a judgement on the scribes and Pharisees,⁴ who are represented by the servant who buried the master’s money. While we today may think that the servant’s action was bizarre and wasteful, to Jews of that time, this would have seen this as a *prudent* and *responsible* act. That’s part

¹ See Matt 25:13-40. See also Luke 19:11–27 for a similar parable but placed in a different setting, and Mark 13:32-37.

² Matt 25:29 onwards uses the Greek word *kyrios* for “master,” which can also be translated as “Lord.” There is likely Greek word-play here!

³ Matt 25:29.

⁴ This follows on from Matt 24:45-25:12 and from Matt 23. The “master” could be either God *or* Jesus – the Son of Man.

of the shock value of the parable, the scribes and Pharisees thought they were doing the *right* thing. They believed they had been given the Law of Moses and the Temple, which signified God's presence among them. They earnestly wanted to preserve and protect the Law and thereby keep the Jews pure and holy. Consequently, they built a rigid fence around the Mosaic Law to shield it from any change, alteration, or development. But God's covenant was made with Israel to *bless* them - and through Israel the whole world. And they had hidden what God and generously given them; they had *not* put their light on a lampstand for all the world to see.⁵ And now the master had come back and was calling them to account for *not* doing God's will. That is Jesus' shocking indictment of the scribes and Pharisees! Who, then, corresponds to the two servants who *do* respond to the master's trust? They are those who hear the call of Jesus and on that basis develop what Israel has already been graciously given.⁶

There is an added question that the parable raises, namely, "What do we think God is like?" The third servant's characterization of the master is as a *harsh* and *unjust* man who only inspires *fear* and *caution*. The master is effectively compared to a sharp businessman who extracts far more from a business deal than is his proper due. Yet at the outset of the story, the master is presented as excessively *generous*, entrusting *vast* quantities of money to servants and giving them complete freedom as to how to use it. The audience has to decide which kind of God it is to be – harsh or generous? The parable does not resolve the dilemma. Yes, the dialogue between the master and third servant is full of accusation and judgement. But what is also clear is that the third servant refused to take risks. We are left with the impression that had he risked some of the money *and made losses*, the master would *not* have blamed him for trying. The third servant was not judged for *achieving* nothing, or even *failing* at what he tried, but for *not doing anything*. In other words, Israel is being condemned for fearful inactivity and not being proactive or responsible with what they had been graciously given. Now this parable doesn't give us the *complete* picture of what God is like, of course, so we should not over-analyze it. Suffice to say that a key point is that God is generous, but he expects us to be responsible and accountable with what he has given.

Second, what would Matthew's *readers* make of the parable?

In chapters 24 and 25 Jesus teaches his disciples about the signs of the end of the age, and hence their need for watchfulness, diligence, and faithfulness. One of the things that Matthew's readers were concerned about was, "Why, given the destruction of the Temple in AD 70, was Jesus taking so long to return?" Matthew responds with 3 parables: The first warns church leaders to be accountable and industrious. The second – the Parable of the Bridesmaids - says that *all* of us must *be prepared* for Christ's return, whenever that will be.⁷ And today's parable speaks of God's people being found proactive and hard at work when Jesus returns, and using - *not* wasting - the gifts God has generously

⁵ See Matt 5:14–16.

⁶ See Matt 13:31–32; indeed, there are many parables in Matt 13 that refer to the "kingdom of God."

⁷ See Matt 25:1-12; <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.204/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Be-Prepared.pdf> . As such there are allegorical elements to all these parables.

given his Church. In that context then, Matthew's readers understood today's parable as being relevant to the fulfillment of God's plan for history, including accountability at the *last* judgement. The master who comes back "after a long time" refers, then, to the delay of the return of the Son of Man in glory. And "entering into the joy of the master" alludes to the final messianic banquet – or the wedding feast mentioned in earlier parables.⁸

And that leads me to my final question: What are we to make of this parable today? I make two observations this morning:

First, the *immensity* of the monetary amounts reminds us of the preciousness of the gifts that God has entrusted to our care. And those differing gifts are conferred wisely; no servant is given more than he or she is capable of handling. Even the one with least ability is given a significant responsibility and honor, for which we should be grateful. We may not be equal in "talents," but we can all be equal in effort. All this is meant to be a source of joy, not of burden!

The traditional reading of this passage in terms of responsible stewardship of our gifts, skills, and resources fits nicely with our Western view of capitalism and individualism. In other words, you get what you deserve: hard work and discipline results in self-improvement. But if we limit the text to that, we will miss key points that I believe Matthew is making. The whole parable must be understood in terms of God's *grace and our response to it*,⁹ rather than simply wise stewardship of property, or money – important though that is. The "talent" in itself does not stand for anything; just like the "oil" in the earlier Parable of the Bridesmaids does not stand for anything. Rather it is about our *attitude* to what God has *given* us, and what we *do* with it. What God desires is responsible deeds of Christian discipleship and service.

Second, there is a key difference in the *attitudes* of the first two servants as compared to the third. The third servant is really ruled by *fear*. He is afraid of God and is fearful of underperforming. We too can be like that if our understanding of God's character is distorted. Why is that? Perhaps some of us feel that our talent is too small to truly make a difference. In which case we belittle ourselves and do not embrace the gifts God has generously given us. For some, it may be a tendency to compare themselves with others and so feel resentment or jealousy of *their* abilities and success. I believe there is another underlying attitude too. The lazy slave does not really *love* his master; he is only interested in himself. There is not the slightest trace of gratitude that his master has entrusted him with such a precious gift. Instead, his respect for his master is limited to a grudging acknowledgment of his power. God is indeed powerful, but God's primary characteristic is love. The third servant doesn't really embrace the fact that his master *loves* him. Do we truly believe in our heads and hearts that God passionately loves us? To summarize, fear and distrust will paralyze us into inactivity, or to squander the opportunities that we

⁸ See [7] and Matt 22:1-14; see: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.204/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Live-a-Life-Worthy-of-Gods-Grace.pdf> .

⁹ See [8].

have. In contrast, the first two servants are prepared to take risks for the kingdom of God. And the reward of Christian service done well is more work and more responsibility! But this is meant as a joyous privilege, not a punishment!

In conclusion, following Jesus is a call to move forward, not to be static. So the point for us all, as individuals and as a church, is this: Are we going to *resist* having our horizons limited by *fear*? Will we instead be willing to take *risks* for the kingdom of God? The greatest risk of all is *not* to risk *anything* but instead to live cautiously and prudently. Do we, as a church or as individuals, play things *too safe*? Most of us don't like high-risk ventures; we seem to prefer the opposite. We don't like getting out of our personal comfort zones and security. Faith - we think - is no more risky than believing *ideas* in our heads about God and Jesus, together with a list of morals to which we subscribe intellectually. Dietrich Bonhoeffer said that, "The sin of respectable people is running from responsibility." Although he was a pacifist, he took his own responsibilities so seriously that he joined the resistance and helped plan an assassination attempt on Hitler's life. His sense of responsibility cost him his own life.¹⁰ Matthew also tells us that Jesus encourages his followers to courageously take risks for the kingdom of God: "Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it," says Jesus.¹¹ Jesus also invites *us* to be his disciples today, and to live out *our* lives as fully as possible by investing them in the kingdom of God. This is a call to be bold and brave, to reach high and to care deeply. It is a call *not* to be afraid, but to know we are *loved* deeply by our master as we journey onward in faith. Amen.

¹⁰ Remember too that, as Matthew places it, Jesus told this story at the climax of Jesus' high-risk ministry, as he himself is about to be thrown out into the darkness and separated from God.

¹¹ Matt 10:39.