

STUDY ON THE PARABLES OF JUDGMENT

The Parable of the Talents, Sheep & Goats

Read Matthew 25:14-46

What is the Kingdom like? That was the question that Jesus sought to answer in the various parables of the Kingdom that he increasingly told as he and his disciples neared Jerusalem and his appointment with the cross.

It is impossible to think of Christ's parables of judgment without thinking at once of the three great parables occurring in Matthew 25 - the parables of the five wise and five foolish virgins, the talents, and the sheep and the goats. Each of them makes similar points, so the cumulative effect of the three stories is particularly strong. They occur in the last great body of teaching by Jesus recorded in Matthew's gospel. At this point Jesus is about to go to the cross. His disciples will see Him no more. But He reminds them that the day is coming when He will return as Judge of all men and that all who are wise should prepare to meet Him in that judgment.

Jesus begins this parable of talents with the words:

"For the kingdom of heaven is like a man traveling to a far country, who called his own servants and delivered his goods to them." (Matthew 25:14)

This parable was on the back of the parable of the Ten virgins. *"Then the kingdom of heaven shall be likened to ten virgins..." (Matthew 25:1)*. The Parable of the Ten Virgins (Matthew 25:1-13) and the Parable of the Talents (Matthew 25:14-30) have two elements in common.

1. **Coming Kingdom.** They both refer to what the Kingdom will be like when the Son of Man comes.
2. **Delay of Christ's Coming.** They both have elements of delay: *"But while the bridegroom was delayed" (25:5)* and *"After a long time the lord of those servants came" (25:19)*.

But while the Parable of the Ten Virgins reminds us to be ready for an extended delay, the Parable of the Talents encourages us that the time waiting for the coming of the Kingdom should be used to make full use of the resources our Lord has given us.

In ancient times, how does a businessman protect his capital when he must be gone for an extended period? He could bury his money, but he probably could not keep his household going at the same time. Perhaps he could deposit his money with a banker for passive growth of interest on the funds (verse 27). But for the best yield, he would find competent people who could invest his money wisely and then actively manage the investment, so that when he returns, the money has been at work and earned a handsome profit. Of course, there is some risk involved, but a businessman can minimize his risk in two ways:

1. Divide the capital into several different investment pools.
2. Give the most capital to the most competent managers and less to those who have yet to prove themselves.

That is exactly what our master does. In this case, he has his servants to do the work for him. He gathers them into his office, explains exactly what he wants them to do, and then distributes his funds among them. Literally he "entrusted his property to them." The Luke version of the parable employs the phrase, "put this money to work" (NIV) or "occupy" (KJV). The root word means "do business, trade." The RSV translation, "trade with these," and the NRSV translation, "do business with these," render the idea well.

Each servant gets an amount of capital commensurate with his/her potential -- "each according to his ability." "Ability" comes from the root word meaning "power," in the sense of, "ability to carry out something, ability, capability." The most promising servant got the most, while the least promising servant got the least.

Now the master leaves town and the servants get to work -- at least two of them.

"The one entrusted with five thousand gold coins immediately went out and traded with the money, and he doubled his investment. In the same way, the one who was entrusted with two thousand gold coins traded with the sum and likewise doubled his investment. But the one who had been entrusted with one thousand gold coins dug a hole in the ground and buried his master's money." (Matthew 25:16-18 TPT)

Notice that the first servant "went off at once" (NIV). He was eager and motivated. He "put his money to work" (NIV) or "traded" (NRSV, KJV) with it. And by the time the master returned, he had doubled his money. The second servant also doubled his money. But the servant with the single talent buried his in the ground. Burying something was considered a secure way of protecting one's treasure, but that only protected the capital; it did not increase it, as the master had intended.

Now, after a while, the master returned.

The time of reckoning had come. Each of the servants is brought into the office to give a report, to "settle accounts." The first two servants can hardly contain themselves as they report their successful investment experiences as they had doubled the master's resources handed to them.

"Well done" The master also praises the character of these servants, calling each a "good and faithful servant." "Faithful" (NIV, KJV), "trustworthy" (NRSV) comes from the Greek word meaning "worthy of belief or trust, trustworthy, faithful, dependable."

"You have been faithful with a few things," says the master. "I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!" If one of the "few things" was responsibility to invest a small amount, the "many things" would have to mean greatly increased responsibility indeed -- and status!

More than that, the servant can bask in the master's "happiness." "Enter into" (NRSV, KJV), "share" indicates some kind of mutual celebration of joy.

The Unproductive Servant

The unproductive servant is bold -- I will give that to him. But he sounds almost like he is accusing his master of being an evil capitalist, "*harvesting where you have not sown and gathering where you have not scattered seed.*" The servant claims to have acted out of fear (verse 25), since his master is a "hard" (NIV, KJV) or "harsh" (NRSV) man. He is accusing his master as to dealing with others in "hard, strict, harsh, cruel, merciless" manner.

The servant sees this accusation as plenty of excuse for his actions. He will return to the master what is his, but he certainly will not help him increase it! There is a vein of bitterness apparent in the servant's answer, along with self-justification. If the servant had nothing to gain, he certainly would not help his master!

The master hears him out, and then lambastes him:

The master calls the unproductive servant a "wicked," meaning, "morally or socially worthless, wicked, evil, bad, base, vicious, degenerate." In addition he is called "lazy" (NIV, NRSV), "slothful" (KJV). The word

meaning a state involving shrinking from something, "holding back, hesitation, reluctance." The adjective means, "idle, lazy, indolent."

His motives were disobedient, self-righteous, and selfish. As a slave, he was morally and legally obligated to serve his master. Instead, he deliberately disobeyed and then excused himself by accusing his master.

The master faults the wicked servant for not even taking the simplest and most conservative steps to get some increase on the money by depositing it with the bankers.

The Faithful Will Receive More

The wicked servant has not been merely lazy but has deliberately refused to do anything that will benefit his master. There is no second chance for deliberate rebelliousness.

"But because you were unfaithful, I will take the one thousand gold coins and give them to the one who has ten thousand. For the one who has will be given more, until he overflows with abundance. And the one with hardly anything, even what little he has will be taken from him. " (**Matthew 25:28-29 TPT**)

The master gives the unused talent to the servant who has five talents already, plus the five more he had earned. Someone might question his action on the basis of fairness -- or perhaps need. "He already has ten -- he doesn't need another." But the king is distributing his gifts on the basis of faithfulness and capability, not fairness or need. After a trial period, the king now expects of his servants a track record of faithfulness *and* productivity -- that they can use his gifts.

But the wicked and lazy servant gets more than a tongue lashing and loss of the talent he had been given to invest. He is punished.

"Then the master said to his other servants, 'Now, throw that good-for-nothing servant far away from me into the outer darkness, where there will be great misery and anguish!'" (**Matthew 25:30 TPT**)

This last verse seems to shift from a parable about a wealthy master punishing a recalcitrant servant to another level entirely, to severe spiritual punishment. Elsewhere in Matthew, "weeping and gnashing of teeth" (8:12) is identified with outer darkness (8:12; 22:13) a fiery furnace (13:42, 50); and being cut in pieces (24:51), all terrible symbols of an even more terrible spiritual fate.

What do the "talents" represent?

What does the "talents" represent? In this parable of talents, the talents represent money at the basic level. Jesus uses different earthly illustration to present a heavenly reality in His parables such as a landowner and tenants and an employer and hiring workers at different times of the day. These are illustrations for a wider truth. I believe "talents" also represents the spiritual gifts, abilities, "natural talents," and knowledge that Jesus has passed on to his disciples -- to you and to me. Moreover, what we must "invest" in Kingdom work includes our station in life, our wealth (if we have any), our houses, our cars, our job, our network of contacts and personal friends.

On what basis does God distribute the "talents"?

"...each according to his ability to manage." (**Matthew 25:15 TPT**)

It is clear that the "talents of money" were given based on "ability." For that reason, we cannot make the simple equation between "talents" and "ability," as some naively do. Remember, "ability" (*dynamis*) here means "ability to carry out something, ability, capability." One's ability to carry out something is based on a number of things:

1. Raw talent
2. Drive
3. Faithfulness
4. Moral character
5. Willingness to focus time to the task

When the master returned, those who had shown faithfulness and ability he rewarded with more responsibility. From the one who had some ability, but who lacked faithfulness, moral character, and will, he took away the single talent that he had been given.

To whom do the "talents" and their increase belong?

It is easy for us to miss the fact that even the most successful servant was still a servant. Even though he had earned a great deal of money for his master, he was not set free as a reward, but given greater responsibilities and higher status in the household. This is significant.

Often, when we become successful, we are tempted to imagine that we are "self-made" men or women and that the fruit of our success is ours to enjoy. This is wrong on three counts. First, no one ever succeeds by himself or herself. All of us are deeply indebted to those who have gone before. Second, it is God who has given us the resources that contribute to success. Third, we are stewards of what God has given. We do not suddenly become owners of God's resources when success comes. We are still stewards and servants of the Most High God (in service). We must never take the glory to ourselves. All glory and credit goes to God who gave the "talents of money" for us to work with in the first place and the grace/ability to make it happen.

How will God reward us for using our "talents"?

One of the haunting lessons of the Parable of the Talents is the attitude -- and fate -- of the servant who had been given one talent and buried it in the ground, ostensibly for safekeeping. God has given you gifts to further his Kingdom. They may include a lot of raw ability, or personal drive, or resources from a wealthy family, or a great job. Or perhaps the ability to help others through dedicated, faithful labour. Whatever it is God has given you, He will hold you accountable.

Parable of the Sheep and the Goats (Matthew 25:31-46)

In the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats, we see the final judgment:

"Then the King will say to those on His right hand, 'Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.'" (Matthew 25:34)

The believers wonder what they had done to deserve this.

"Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give You drink? ... And the King will answer and say to them, 'Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me.'" (Matthew 25:37, 40)

We do not do good deeds as "eye-service" to impress Jesus and earn "points" for heaven. We do them because "we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works" (Ephesians 2:10). We do them because he has put his values in our hearts by his Holy Spirit, because we want to live as Jesus would, if he were in our place. Yet he sees each service and will reward it on that Day.

Can our "talents" be taken away?

There is a saying, "Use it or lose it." I think it applies to the Parable of the Talents. The servant who did not use his "talent" for the master ended up losing it. It was taken away and given to a person who had demonstrated both ability and faithfulness. Ponder Jesus' teaching from this parable:

"So, take the talent from him, and give it to him who has ten talents. 'For to everyone who has, more will be given, and he will have abundance; but from him who does not have, even what he has will be taken away.'"
(Matthew 25:28-29)

There is a truth that "God's gifts and his call are irrevocable" (Romans 11:29), though that verse is in the context of the election of Israel to be God's chosen people, not spiritual gifts. But there is also a truth that if we do not use God's gifts for their intended purpose, they can be taken away and given to someone who will use them.

