

The Parable of the Talents

Matthew 25:14-30

Turn to Matthew 25 please. We can read a similar parable in Luke 19. Jesus spent a lot of time travelling from town to town and teaching. He would naturally have had similar message in each town, but it would come out a little differently each time. I have preached the same sermon in different places, and it has never been quite the same the second time.

We've been in Luke for a while, so we're going back to Matthew here. Matthew has this parable right at the end of Jesus' ministry. Jesus teaches three parables in Matthew 25, all after his difficult last days in Jerusalem, after he left the temple for the last time and told the disciples that not one stone would be left on another.

These three are right at the end of his life, in Matthew 26 Jesus and the disciples have the Last Supper, and the events of his crucifixion follow. So whatever Jesus is saying here will be pretty basic to his whole message.

This parable divides into three parts.

The Master's Journey and the Servants' Response (25:14-18) *"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.*

The master gave them a lot of money, he gave them his wealth, all he had. But it is still his, the understanding is that the servants will use this fortune to the master's advantage. V18 ends, "his master's money," the money still belongs to the master, and the servants put it to work.

One talent was something like ten years' wage for a labourer. They are each getting a fortune.

The servants would do something like rent fields, or perhaps buy fields, and oversee the planting of seed and the harvest, and save the earnings, or maybe buy more fields with the profit. The people who heard Jesus would assume something along those lines.

The Master's Return and the First Two Servants (25:19-23) 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 joy!' 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 joy!'*

The two faithful servants get exactly the same reward, the same blessing, word for word.

"You have been faithful with a few things" is strange considering how much money they were given. The "many things" must be very substantial. The reward is honour, and responsibility, and sharing in the master's joy.

His joy will be having his faithful servants with him. His joy at having us with him will be our sunshine, we will bask in his joy at having his faithful servants beside him. "Come share your master's joy."

The Master and the Third Servant (25:24-30)

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 into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'*

Let's talk about the accusation of the third servant. "You are a hard man. You harvest where you did not plant, you gather where you did not scatter." In other words, "you are just in this for yourself, you do not care about anyone else." In fact, "harvesting where you did not plant" is pretty close to calling him a cheat, a thief. If it does not mean that, it is close.

The thing is, this master gave out seven talents, seven fortunes. The third servant has his untouched fortune in his hand, freshly dug out of the ground, he's about to return it.

How can he say this master does not plant or scatter? The servant has a huge amount of the master's seed in his hand. The master planted and scattered all he had! He entrusted his wealth to his servants. From the parable, we know the third servant's accusation is false, empty, and blind.

To What do the Talents Refer? Each servant gets much wealth. To what does this correspond in our real lives? First I will tell you two things to which it does NOT refer.

One, not natural abilities. The Greek for “bag of gold” is *talanta*, which translators call “talent,” which is fair enough. But it is a large unit of money. The English “talent” can also mean a natural ability, but seeing these large units of money as natural gifts and abilities comes from a pure coincidence of language.

The master gold to each servant based on their ability, according to their ability, in v15. Jesus says it in just that way, so the one thing it does NOT mean is natural ability, because the servants already have that, before they get the money.

If the money meant natural ability, then the goal would be to get more natural ability, and that does not work well either.

Two, not money. This has been taught as a stewardship parable. At first glance I like this better, because a talent is actually money. And near the end Jesus says, “whoever has will be given more, and they will have in abundance.” You can imagine how preachers who think all faithful believers should be rich would like that line.

But for a couple of reasons that does not work well either. The amounts given to these slaves is huge, the one with five talents gets about a whole lifetime of labourer’s wages. But Jesus in the Gospels viewed most of his followers as poor, as labourers. How would it be useful to them for them to see themselves as each given a huge amount of money?

Also, expecting followers to double their money does not work well in Matthew either. Jesus said, “you cannot serve God and money” and don’t worry about money, God will supply food and clothing and shelter. We have to throw out the rest of Matthew to make the bags of gold correspond to money in the real world.

To what, then, to the talents refer? The kingdom of God itself. There is no direct answer in this parable. But consider that this is right at the end of Jesus’ ministry. It has to be something basic to following him.

The amount of gold would be great riches to each of his slaves. What would that be? The master gave his slaves all he had to give. He entrusted his wealth to them. In Matthew, what would that be so far? What has Jesus been offering people all along? The kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are the poor in spirit, says Jesus, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. That is the first beatitude, and the kingdom is priceless. A man wandering across a field came across a treasure, and joyfully sold all he had to get the field. That’s the kingdom, the treasure, the bags of gold, the pearl of great price.

And the lesson of the parable is this: the kingdom of God is a treasure, it is a fortune, it is given to us freely, but it comes with responsibility: we will use it to the master’s advantage. Which from other parts of the gospel we know to be imitating Jesus and living by what he taught.

The master entrusted to us everything he had to give. Eventually that included his own life, although I don't know if that's being considered at this stage. But he has offered us the kingdom of heaven, forgiveness of sins, eternal life with God our Father. That's the wealth, the talents.

And for the one who says, "You are a harsh master and I refuse to serve you, I will not use your gift myself, and I will not use it to your advantage," for that one there is severe judgment.

To Each According to their Ability. That the slaves receive different amounts of wealth is unimportant. But different ability is important. We each receive the great treasure, the kingdom itself, but we don't have the same ability to use it to the master's advantage.

This master knows it is not fair to expect the same from every slave. He knows how we are made, and he knows what it is fair to expect. A good boss, if someone works for you day after day, does not expect heroic things. The good boss expects an honest day's work.

Don't go to sleep, don't sneak off, if you must rest a few minutes then do so, but stay at the task, give honest effort. With this attitude, some workers will get more done than others.

A good boss will let that be. Don't expect the slower ones to match those who are always energetic, don't make their work a daily ordeal. Everybody offers a honest day's work, and some get more done than others. A good boss works with that, lives with it.

Jesus is a good master, and we are good slaves. We use his gift of salvation and eternal life to his advantage. Which means we trust him and live in his ways. What comes out of honest effort from one believer will look different than another believer's honest effort, and this master knows all about that. "According to each one's ability."

The talents are great wealth, they represent all the master has to offer his slaves, every slave receives a fortune. Jesus uses this to show right and wrong responses to the kingdom he is offering. The kingdom is free. He offers it to whoever will say, "Yes, I want that, I am poor in spirit, and I really want to inherit that kingdom of God."

A good slave will use that gift to the master's advantage. That means an honest effort to live that out one day at a time. This Master expects what every good boss expects, he does not want work to be an unpleasant ordeal, but he does want a day of honest effort, and a good boss knows some workers get more done on this basis than others, and that's completely okay.

Those workers will hear the same praise, both the more energetic ones and the slower ones, those with more ability, and those with less, "Well done, good and faithful slave. You've been faithful with small things, I will entrust you with great things. Come and share your Master's joy."

Eschatology One quarter of this parable, 7 of 29 lines, a bit less than a quarter if you are fussy, tells us about the master giving his wealth to his servants and tells us what the three servants did. Three quarters of this parable tells us what happened after the master came back = Jesus' return.

First quarter equals this present life. He was gone a long time, then after a long time he returned, ¼ of the way into this parable. This is normal in Jesus' parables, and in all his teaching. Jesus could not explain this life without saying a lot about the next life.

We cannot understand this age without understanding what happens in the next age. The conversation this master has with his three slaves happens after this life is over, after Jesus returns, at the beginning of the next life, the next age.

We have to know about THAT conversation in the NEXT life to understand what's actually going on in THIS life. Again, Jesus taught like this frequently. Being a Christian makes no sense if this age is separated from the next. It makes no sense on its own.

Following God in this life was not intended to make sense on its own. Jesus could not show us about trusting and obeying him in this life without talking about the next life.

Jesus does not teach this parable to give hope to the dying. Eschatology in the NT us usually NOT to give hope to the dying, occasionally it does do that advance.

The NT normally tells us about the future for exactly the reason Jesus does so here: *so the living will live wisely this day, and this week.*

The Third Servant (25:24-30) 40% of this parable is about the 3rd servant. The third servant says, "I do not like what kind of master you are, you are harsh, you don't care about others, you are just out for yourself. I want no part of your gift. Here it is, you can have it back untouched."

"You, master, are not good news, and your wealth is not good news. You are frightening, and your offer is a burden. I want no part of your offer." There are people around us who feel like that about God, and about Jesus, and his offer. There were people then around Jesus like that.

Jesus's own burden in this parable is this warning. It is almost half the parable, and the parable ends with this. Jesus saw people doing this to his offer all the time, and he warned them.

I can't bring myself to spend 40% of this sermon warning against what the 3rd servant did. I am a product of our time, as are we all. But our kind and merciful Jesus used that much of this parable to warn those who were walking away from him.

In my experience, you people that I know well will hear, "well done, good and faithful slave, enter into the joy of your Lord." I say this because the kingdom of heaven shapes your lives. That's what using the kingdom to the Lord's advantage means.

The assumption concerning all three slaves, when they were given the master's wealth, is that they were free to live off the money while they invested and worked. They are slaves, have no other income, the master is responsible to feed and clothe them.

The third slave wants no part of this: "You have offered me a fortune, I want no part of it, I will not use any of it. You can have every bit of it back, untouched. You and your wealth are bad news.

The third slave said he was afraid because he knew the master was harsh. The master is clearly not guilty as charged, the parable itself has made that clear. But he will judge the slave by his own words. If the slave was afraid to fail, then he could have taken the money to the bank and collected interest. If fear was the problem, there was a safe response at hand: the bank.

The master said, "You are wicked and lazy, not afraid." The problem is not that you were afraid, it is that you refused to use the master's offer to the master's advantage. You would not use the master's treasure to the master's advantage.

Jesus saw that happen all the time. People thought they were free to walk away. The 3rd slave ends with, "see, you have yours back." It seems that he thinks he owes the master no more, the master has no more claim on him, because he gave back the treasure untouched.

But it will not end that way. This Master is Lord of heaven and earth, every knee, everywhere, will bow to this Master in one way or another. No one may just walk away from this gift. Jesus' words: *And throw that worthless servant into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.*

In this parable there are only two kinds of servants. The Bible is often like this, very often. We see more grey area between the edges, we see people on a continuum. I do. But not the Bible.

There are servants who willingly use the master's fortune to the master's advantage. That means, we receive the kingdom and eternal life and we make ordinary steady effort to honour God with our lives, including of course a good deal of stumbling and weakness, but we carry on. These will hear, "well done, you were good and faithful, enter into my joy."

And there are servants who are not interested in the treasure and will not use the fortune to the master's advantage. These are people who hear the gospel offer and they walk away, and think they are free to do so. Jesus saw too much of this. These will hear, "throw him into the outer darkness."

Amen.