

5. The Parable of the Talents

(Matt. 25: 14–30)

In so many of the parables we are discussing, we learn a lot about the nature of God and of His Kingdom, but we are also learning about the work that we people need to be doing in order to live with Him in that Kingdom. In the parables about heaven as a wedding feast, we see that God is generous with us, and He invites us into the banquet -- but we have to accept that invitation, drop everything we are doing, and make sure to fill our lamps with oil in order to get there. We have work to do.

We have already seen one parable in which we are really workers -- we are laborers in the vineyard, and God calls us to come work at different times of the day, but at the end of the day, we all receive the same pay. Whether we are born into the faith or become Christians later in life, we are all loved equally by God, and we all receive the Kingdom together.

The Parable of the Talents in Matthew's gospel is a really interesting story in which, once again, we see ourselves as workers and God as our boss. The boss is generous with his workers; he is a really nice boss. But the workers cannot be lazy. They can't just sit around and assume that the boss will be happy with them no matter what -- they are supposed to be working, and doing their best.

So in the parable, we remember that talents are a kind of money; denarii are small money, but talents are worth a lot of money. We are servants, and our boss is about to take a journey, so he gives us our assignments. The parable begins,

“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. And to one he gave five talents, to another two, and to another one, to each according to his own ability; and immediately he went on a journey.

Then he who had received the five talents went and traded with them, and made another five talents. And likewise he who had received two gained two more also. But he who had received one went and dug in the ground, and hid his lord's money.

At the beginning, the boss does not give the same amount of money to each of his servants. He gives them “each according to their ability”. He knows them well, and knows who can handle a larger number of talents, and who would be overwhelmed by too many. The man gives them each as much as they can handle, and then he goes away on his trip.

Of course, God knows us well too. He doesn't make all of us the same, or treat all of us exactly the same way. We are all so different from each other! Some of us are strong in different ways and we are good at different things. Some of us are rich, some are poor. Our lives start out differently, in different places and with different gifts. God knows each of us so well; He knows our hearts. He can judge what we're able to do because He knows us so well.

So the man gives each servant a different number of talents, and the one who got the most talents took them and “traded with them” to make more money. Maybe he used the boss’ money to buy something, and then he was able to improve it and sell it for more money. He did some work, he tried his best, and in the end he made as much money as his boss had given him. He started with five talents, and finished with ten. The second servant, who is given two talents, does the same thing: he works hard and does some kind of business with the money, and he also doubles the money! He was given two talents, and he ends up with four!

But the third servant doesn’t go trade with his one talent; instead he digs a hole and buries the talent. If this is really a story about God giving us special gifts -- maybe good families or special abilities or even life itself -- then we see that God is giving us these valuable things, and we can either go to work developing them and making them even greater, or we can just bury them in the earth. We can either have our eyes on heaven and try to live a good and holy life, or we can drop our heads and focus only on the ground, burying our talents into earthly pursuits and never doing the work God hopes we will do.

In the parable, when the man returns, he checks in with his servants to see what they did with his money. We read,

After a long time the lord of those servants came and settled accounts with them.

“So he who had received five talents came and brought five other talents, saying, ‘Lord, you delivered to me five talents; look, I have gained five more talents besides them.’ His lord said to him, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant; you were faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord.’

He also who had received two talents came and said, ‘Lord, you delivered to me two talents; look, I have gained two more talents besides them.’ His lord said to him, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord.’

“Then he who had received the one talent came and said, ‘Lord, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you have not sown, and gathering where you have not scattered seed. And I was afraid, and went and hid your talent in the ground. Look, there you have what is yours.’
“But his lord answered and said to him, ‘You wicked and lazy servant, you knew that I reap where I have not sown, and gather where I have not scattered seed. So you ought to have deposited my money with the bankers, and at my coming I would have received back my own with interest. 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. And cast the unprofitable servant into the outer darkness. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’

(Matt. 25: 14-30)

The man returns to “settle accounts” with his servants. They were each given a different number of talents, and now they will come to the boss with different results. The first servant brings the five he was given plus five more; that’s ten talents! The second servant brings fewer talents: he brings the two he was given and two more, for a total of four talents. The servant with ten talents has a lot more than the servant with four, but their boss is not concerned about that. He is really happy with both of them. He knows that they started out with different gifts, and they both did their best and turned those first blessings into even more blessings!

God says the same thing to the servants, even though one has ten and the other has four: “Well done, good and faithful servant; you were faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord.” Remember the vineyard workers? They all worked, but some worked longer and some worked shorter -- but in the end, they were all invited into the joy of our Lord; they were all paid equally with eternal life in heaven.

If talents are the blessings God gives us, what could we do to make God happy like those two servants did? Well God gives everyone different blessings, and as His servants, we should go out and create even more blessings! If He gives us five, we should create five more! How would you use your blessings to create more blessings? Maybe you are a good singer, and you could become a chanter in church and bring joy to others! Or maybe you receive love from God, so you just keep giving out love to everyone else. God gives you hope and love and joy, so you help the people around you feel hopeful, loved, and joyful. By pouring out blessings on the people around us, we multiply the blessings we have received.

Very often, when a person in the Church dies, we will remember the words of this man to both of those servants: “Well done, good and faithful servant; you were faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord.” We think about how our beloved person was given blessings from God, and how that person created even more blessings in the world, and we remember that now God will give them even greater blessings in heaven, as they enter into the joy of the Lord.

This third servant who buried his talent in the earth does not hear the same joyful thing from the boss. He didn’t lose the talent -- he didn’t throw it away or waste it or anything -- and yet, he is scolded for having done a bad job. The servant did not exactly do something bad, but he didn’t do anything good. Jesus is teaching us that doing nothing at all is actually wrong, and we will only enter into the joy of our Lord if we are doing something, if we are working to multiply the blessings God gives us.

God gave him blessings, and he didn’t do anything to bless others. He wasn’t grateful; he didn’t love or trust his boss, but said that he was a “hard man” so he buried that talent. He just took those blessings and hid them away, without considering how loving God is, and without responding to God’s love with more love. He did not spread his blessings to others, multiplying the love in this world. He just buried the talent; he just buried the blessings. This might remind us of another servant; the unmerciful servant who we learned was forgiven so much by his boss, but who then was unforgiving to the next servant. He received the blessing of mercy, and he didn’t spread that mercy around, he didn’t act merciful. If he had, there would have been more mercy in the world, kind of like multiplying talents.

If this parable is about God as the boss, and us as His workers, then Jesus is telling us that one day, there will be a judgement. There will come a time when we go before the Lord and show Him what we have done with our lives. He knows what blessings He gave us, and if we have trusted Him and loved Him and gone out into the world spreading that love, then He will be delighted with us, and give us even more blessings! But if we don't -- if we don't respond to His love with more love -- then He won't be pleased with us and He won't invite us into the joy of heaven.

God gives us blessings, and He wants to see us grow our hearts by giving out blessings too! Whether the blessings we are passing around are physical, like money and food and clothing for the poor, or whether they are more spiritual, like love and mercy and joy, God wants to see us multiply those blessings by spreading them around throughout the world. When we sit back and do nothing, we're not acting like God and we're not using what God has given to us. We must find ways to show the goodness inside of us to others, to share it with the world, if we wish to enter into the joy of the Lord.

QUESTIONS:

The boss in the parable is about to go away, so he does something with his money. Why does he do that?

- *He gives his talents (money) to his different workers in different amounts, each according to his own ability. The boss knows that each worker has different strengths and abilities, so he gives them what they can handle well for him while he is away.*

How does the boss in the parable feel about the servants' work when he returns and collects his talents (money). How do you know?

- *The boss is very pleased with the servants who did what they could with the talents, and ended up doubling what they had. He tells them, "Well done, good and faithful servant!" But the boss is frustrated with the laziness and fear of the third servant who just buries his talent. He has that man's talent taken away from him and given to another.*

What is Jesus teaching us through this parable?

- *Jesus is teaching us that doing nothing at all is actually wrong, and we will only enter into the joy of our Lord if we are doing something, if we are working to multiply the blessings God gives us.*

FOR DISCUSSION:

Think a little about this: which of the three servants do you want to be like? Are you like that servant? Now, talk together about the blessings God has given to you. You may even want to make a list! Do you have physical blessings like money, food, or clothing? Do you have spiritual blessings like love, mercy, or joy? Now think about all of those blessings (or look at your list). What good things are you doing in the world with your blessings? Are you passing them around, multiplying the blessings that you have? Or are you keeping them to yourself, “buried” in your hand or your heart? What one thing can you do that you’re not yet doing, that will show the goodness in your heart and share it with the world? Talk about it, then go do it!