

# **The Parable of the Talents**

Matthew 25:14-30  
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In October I had the privilege of travelling in Virginia, visiting historical sites that included Civil War battlefields and founding father estates and enjoying the fall foliage along Skyline Drive in Shenandoah National Park.

The most profound experience of the entire trip was during our visit to Monticello, the estate of Thomas Jefferson, when we took the tour of the slave quarters and learned some of the stories of Jefferson's enslaved workers.

I wrote in our church newsletter that toward the end of the tour the guide said, "We believe that this tour is important because Monticello was the home of more people than just Thomas Jefferson. These enslaved persons were robbed of their humanity. We want to give them back their humanity. Give them back their names, and share their stories, so that you will understand their contributions to history."

One of those slaves I learned about was George Granger, known also as Great George and King George. Jefferson's son-in-law Thomas Mann Randolph referred to George as "George the Ruler." George Granger was married . . . though of course we understand that marriage for slaves was not a relationship legally recognized by the state or federal governments . . . He was married to Ursula who ran the kitchens. Their son Isaac also became a prominent member of the estate and later in life as a freedman wrote a memoir of slave life on the plantation.

When the British took Richmond, Virginia in 1775 during the Revolutionary War, Jefferson was governor of Virginia and had fled. It was George who was left in charge of the governor's mansion and who parlayed with the British commander. His son Isaac told the story:

When the British came in, an officer rode up and asked, "Whar is the Governor?" George told him, "He's gone to the mountains." The officer said, "Whar is the keys of the house?" Isaac's father gave him the keys. . . . The officer said, "Whar is the silver?" Isaac's father told him, "It was all sent up to the mountains." The old man had put all the silver about the house in a bed tick and hid it under a bed in the kitchen and saved it too. . . .

When Thomas Jefferson went to Paris as the United States Ambassador to France, he left Monticello in the charge of a white overseer, but he entrusted a certain portion of the plantation and its management to George. When Jefferson returned to Virginia he discovered that the overseer had not managed the estate well, so he fired him. The only part of the plantation that had fared well in Jefferson's absence was that managed by George. Therefore, Jefferson promoted George to be the overseer on the plantation.

As our tour guide pointed out, this was extremely rare, for an enslaved black worker to

be set as overseer on a plantation. And the tour guide informed us how difficult George found the position to be, as it meant that he now became the boss over other slaves participating in the exploitation of their labor and humanity. George died two years later of self-poisoning when he was sick and took a home remedy.

I tell this story of George Granger because it gives us a more recent perspective on the sort of situation described in the parable Jesus tells here in the Gospel of Matthew. The story is about slaves and masters and does not open itself to easy answers. Here is another bit of wisdom the tour guide shared with us. He said that people all the time ask if Jefferson was a “benevolent master.” The guide said, “There is no such thing as a benevolent slave master. Being a slave master, by definition, is not benevolent.” He went on to say that Jefferson could be very tough and exacting but also fair and did allow some of his favourite slaves more privileges than was common, but that we should not confuse this with benevolence.

The Parable of the Talents is one of those very familiar biblical stories, and one that I thought I knew what to do with – how to interpret it, how to preach it. But, then, one of those wonderful things happened this week that routinely happens when one is studying the Bible. As I read this passage, particularly the final few verses, I realized that I had no clue how to interpret it and was puzzled with how to preach about it.

We engaged in a lively discussion about this story and its interpretation at our Sanctuary group on Wednesday night. Edie Godfrey said she had always understood the story to convey the message that we each have been given gifts from God and that we are responsible for developing them, not letting them go to waste. I agreed that that is what I had always heard as well and the message that I had planned to develop in the sermon this morning. It is a good message and clearly one of the things we can get out of this story. . .

But as often happens, especially with parables, there is more to the story than this. The parables often have a simple, straightforward interpretation on first reading, but scholars and commentators repeatedly warn pastors to be careful about ever preaching – “This parable means X.” Because all the parables invite us into a world, open up possibilities, and set us to thinking and discussing.

Archibald Hunter in his book *Interpreting the Parables*, writes, “Every parable of Jesus was meant to evoke a response and to strike for a verdict. ‘What do you think?’ he sometimes begins, and where the words are not found, the question is implied.’ . . . ‘This is more than just a pleasant story. Go and work it out for yourselves.’”

James Breech, in his book *Jesus and Postmodernism* delights in the postmodernity of Jesus’ parables. He writes, “In place of closure, ending, or finality, at the end of these stories we have opening and complexity, a sudden revelation of the genuine ambiguity that occurs when the consequences of actions are seen in terms of the way they penetrate the lives of others.”

I’ve always liked that quote from Breech. The point of the parables is not to give us a final answer about anything, but to invite us to consider how our actions affect the lives of others.

So, what are some things we might need to consider about this parable?

A talent, as mentioned in this story, is an amount of money. It could, of course,

symbolically stand for other things. In fact, our English word talent, describing innate gifts and abilities actually comes from this very story. But the literal reading of talent is an amount of money.

It is equivalent to fifteen years wages, meaning that even the slave receiving one talent received a wealthy sum. The slave who received five, received a lifetime's worth of wages. I suppose Jesus' hearers would be shocked by the amounts of money involved.

A traditional reading of this passage would laud the two slaves who double their wealth. One commentary I read raised a question about how the wealth could have been doubled. In the ancient world there were none of the investment mechanisms we currently have, even the kind of risky investments that ruined the world economy in recent years. Doesn't it seem likely that the only way in the ancient world that one could have doubled a lifetime's wealth in a few years would have been through exploitative or criminal means?

If so, then maybe one commentary I read was right. That commentary said the third slave is the real hero of the story, exposing an unjust and exploitative economic system.

Another thing to note, is that lending money at interest was forbidden in ancient Jewish law. We interpret the statement about putting the money in the bank as a thrifty and wise thing to do. For those listening to Jesus, that would have been viewed as an immoral, religiously forbidden thing to do. No faithful, righteous Jew of Jesus' time would ever deposit their money in a bank and earn interest. In fact, the rabbis had instructed people that the faithful thing to do with a lot of money was to bury it and keep it safe.

What of this third slave and his master? Is the master really an awful person? That actually isn't clear from the story. The slave seems to think he is, but in the early parts of the parable he has been exceedingly generous. When the master says, "You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and scatter where I did not scatter?" is the master affirming that the slave's perception and fear are accurate? Or is the master saying something like, "Well, since you thought I was this way, then you'll see me act this way." The slave's fear becomes a self-fulfilling prophesy and the master he expected is the one he gets. In this interpretation it is the slave's own fear which results in his being cast out.

Now what about those final lines? Don't they run so counter to what we usually know? A few weeks ago I preached about the land owner who gave excessive amounts to his workers, more than they even deserved. This story seems contrary to it.

Plus, we are used to hearing repeatedly in scripture, "the first shall be last and the last shall be first," and here we read something which sounds contradictory to that, "to those who have more will be given and to those with nothing, even what they have will be taken away." Yikes!

Does the master represent God? Often we seem to think so, but the way he acts and talks here at the end is unsettling. However, Jesus has been unsettling people in all these parables in Matthew. Often Jesus will tell a story that, on the face of it, is shocking. An unrighteous judge, a greedy servant, an inhospitable homeowner, and more. And in many of those cases Jesus seems to be saying, "Even if this awful person can end up doing the good and righteous thing, then surely God will be even more faithful and merciful with us." A similar sort of thing could be going on here.

So, those are all observations arising from the story itself. What about the wider context?

In the other parables we've looked at this autumn, Jesus has been teaching in the temple and has been engaged in conversation with the religious leaders who have tried to trap him into saying or doing something which would justify his arrest. In chapter 24 he leaves the temple and goes with his disciples up onto the Mount of Olives which overlooks the temple and the city of Jerusalem. There he talks to them about the coming reign of God and the end of the age. It is a sermon filled with apocalyptic images. It concludes with the line, "Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour."

Then, Jesus tells the first of four parables. He begins, "Who then is the faithful and wise slave, whom his master has put in charge of his household, to give the other slaves their allowance of food at the proper time?"

We should read the Parable of the Talents as part of this discourse, in which Jesus is telling the disciples how to live as they wait for the reign of God to arrive in fullness. And how we are to do that is similar to a wise slave put in charge of the household giving out the provisions at the proper time.

So, what does that mean, how do we give out the provisions at the proper time? Maybe the answer to that question comes in the fourth parable, the one Jesus tells just after the Parable of the Talents. It is the story of the sheep and the goats and the final judgment. In that parable Jesus says,

Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me. . . . Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.

The Parable of the Talents, then, raises the question of how we are to be faithful stewards with the blessings that God has given us. But it only raises the question. It alone does not give us any answers.

In fact, it raises a host of complicated questions. How do we invest our money in ethical and faithful ways? How do we earn our wages? How do we serve our masters and our bosses? How do we treat those who work for us? How should we be generous, how thrifty, how trustworthy? How do we avoid being wicked, timid, fearful, and lazy?

Jesus is telling us that these financial questions are ones we must consider. That how we answer them and how we live is part of our faithful witness to the coming reign of God. If there is any one message that we can simply take from the Parable of the Talents, it is one Jesus has brought up again and again – what we do with our money matters.

But does Jesus give us any insight on exactly what we are to do with our money and our labor?

In the Gospel of Matthew Jesus has given an extended sermon on what we should do if we are to live faithfully as the people of God. It is called the Sermon on the Mount. And, so,

the Parable of the Talents, and our own questions about financial stewardship, must be read within the context of what Jesus said there. And here is some of what he said:

No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.

Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? . . . Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin . . . But if God so clothes the grass of the field . . . will God not much more clothe you – you of little faith?

So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own.

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven . . . for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find, knock, and the door will be opened for you.

In everything do to others as you would have them do to you.

In these words, let us discern the wisdom of God. Let these guide you as you prayerfully consider how to be a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ. As you determine how to live in this period of waiting for the reign of God to arrive.

Finally, our congregation today receives pledge cards. We are in the process of preparing our budget and our mission plan for 2012. We are discerning how God is calling us to be faithful as we collectively await and work for the reign of God. As we do this, let us be guided in our financial decision-making by one final passage in the Sermon on the Mount. A passage which itself might reveal why hiding the treasure was wrong:

You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under a bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your God in heaven.