

## Matthew 25:14-30 — The parable of the talents

“Again, it will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted his wealth to them. <sup>15</sup> To one he gave five bags of gold, to another two bags, and to another one bag,<sup>a</sup> each according to his ability. Then he went on his journey. <sup>16</sup> The man who had received five bags of gold went at once and put his money to work and gained five bags more. <sup>17</sup> So also, the one with two bags of gold gained two more. <sup>18</sup> But the man who had received one bag went off, dug a hole in the ground and hid his master’s money.

<sup>19</sup> “After a long time the master of those servants returned and settled accounts with them. <sup>20</sup> 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.’

<sup>21</sup> “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!’

<sup>22</sup> “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.’

<sup>23</sup> “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!’

<sup>24</sup> “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. <sup>25</sup> So I was afraid and went out and hid your gold in the ground. See, here is what belongs to you.’

<sup>26</sup> “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? <sup>27</sup> 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.

<sup>28</sup> “So take the bag of gold from him and give it to the one who has ten bags. <sup>29</sup> 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. <sup>30</sup> And throw that worthless servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’

**The parable of the talents** is honestly one of those Jesus stories that I have struggled with most of my life. It is very obvious in some ways — we all understand that large investments gain large rewards, and smaller ones not so much. But how does this relate to the kingdom of heaven? And what do we do with the third slave, who digs a hole, and the way he is treated? I couldn’t help sympathising with the third one, and finding his treatment harsh. Is God like this? And what is meant by this third slave’s characterisation of his master as a hard man, harvesting where he has not sown? We need to think what Jesus’s parable meant to the people at the time, and what does it mean to us now?

Firstly, though, let’s look at detail and context a bit. A talent was a very large quantity of money — about 6000 denarii or 16.5 years’ wages for a normal worker. So even one talent is a really big investment.

Secondly — there were no safes or banks. If you wished to keep treasure safe, you would bury it in the ground like you’re a character in *Treasure Island*. This was most spectacularly true of the group who wrote the Dead Sea Scrolls. One of these scrolls was copper, not parchment, and is a list of locations where the community’s treasure had been buried. So the third slave was not behaving unusually — burying treasure was a done thing.

Thirdly — we are told that the master entrusted his wealth with these slaves, and later that he came to settle accounts with them. If they were expected merely to safeguard the wealth there would be no settling of accounts — so the intention is that this wealth *should be actively invested*.

Now what does it all mean? To know this we need to imagine what the talents or bags of gold mean. The English word 'talent', meaning skill or aptitude derives from the Greek word for a weight of gold. Perhaps we should let the talents be talents? Jesus, the master, expects the talented to put their gifts to service, rather than to squander their 'talents'. While I'm sure that we all lament the talented not using their gifts, but I don't think this is the point of Jesus's parable. The talents are something else.

Perhaps these investments are the gifts of the Holy Spirit? Perhaps the power to heal, prophesy, teach with Godly wisdom, and share the gospel? Those to whom Jesus has given Spiritual gifts have a responsibility to use them. And this may indeed be true — but this is Jesus speaking, before the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost. He usually addressed the here and now (or rather the 'there and then').

So, that leaves me simply with these 'talents' being the knowledge of God's love, and the riches of his grace. This understanding allows the parable to make pointed remarks about first-century Judaism. Jesus and the prophets before him made repeated comments that the Jewish leaders of his day had not embraced, understood or acted according to the extraordinary gift and investment that God had made in their people. They had misunderstood their God, and had treated their covenant with contempt, as a special gift only to them.

This now makes sense. The parable of the talents accuses Israel of both burying the gift of their special relationship with God, and of failing even to know their master's character.

When the third slave says: 'I knew that you were a hard man', the point is that he *has not understood the master at all*, and has mistaken this master other masters — other gods. If the master really were that hard man, fear of doing wrong would be understandable.

If the Jews of Jesus's day are the third slave, then the disciples and the Christians to follow must be those first two slaves — who know their master, understand the honour of being entrusted with such a large investment, and who understand well that they are expected to make the investment grow.

Perhaps we can see the slaves as us as individuals, or perhaps the church as a whole. This begs the question: is this a church that knows the riches of God's love? Then we must invest that love and make it grow, as much as we have known that love ourselves.

The simple conclusion of the parable is to beg us to change our focus. The Ten commandments seems full of 'thou shalt not.' '**Don't do wrong**'. But Jesus urges us to **go and do right**. Change the focus, from eliminating the negative to accentuating the positive. Don't bury your talent, fearing loss and shame — but go and invest, hopeful of success. Look for the good you can do, more than you look to the sins you could eliminate.

The Jews of Jesus's day did not do very well at winning others to their faith. And yet surely if the Phoenicians and Babylonians and such like had known that the Lord God was different to their idols and deities many would have turned to God and a better way of being. Christianity excelled at this faith-sharing in the first centuries, but how are we doing now? It's got quite hard to do, hasn't it? The world has been disinterested in our faith, and this is disheartening. But I want to encourage you — the world is changing again, and there is once again a greater thirst for spirituality, and an acceptance that Christianity has much to offer. This year I have had conversations with several people just talking about our faith — not by my pushiness, but by their wanting to know and understand more. Perhaps someone may talk to you about your faith? It may not happen to you, but this curiosity about the faith is out there, and we would love to share it.

I have two suggestions for our prayers. Firstly, I encourage you to pray regularly for the church to grow — for empty pews to be filled with people eager to be there, wanting to know and respond to God's love.

Secondly, think of five people you know whom you would like to see blessed by having a faith — and pray for *them*, regularly. This is not a guarantee that they will all find faith — but if we all pray for five, I'm sure some of those will come to faith. And, sometimes God sees those who are eager for the faith to be shared, and puts opportunities in their way.

The parable of the talents expresses something of the enormity of God's love invested in us, and the trust that God has in us that we will increase that love. We can do that in many ways, but being open and talking to others about Jesus is an important one. We may not feel comfortable or ready to do that, but we can pray for others, and that is an important step in itself.

The more we share the 'talents' God has given us, the more we, like the slaves of our story, will share in our Master's happiness. The parable of the talents is not as it first appears, about a man with huge wealth and high expectations. It is much more win-win than that — as we might expect from our good and loving God.

Amen. SDG.

**This Tuesday 21<sup>st</sup> we are meeting in the church for a time of Prayer and Fasting between 10am and 2pm.** Drop in for 5 minutes or for as long as you wish. Give up something; a meal, chocolate, a TV program, whatever you feel might help you to concentrate on your prayers and show the sincerity of your concerns before God. There will be printed prayers available or simply come before God in your own words, sitting quietly by yourself or in a group, whatever you are comfortable with.

We look forward to seeing you Tuesday.

**Can you make Christmas Biscuits?** On December 2<sup>nd</sup> we will have a stall at the Village Hall Craft Fair, being a witness of the church in our community and selling Christmas Biscuits to raise much needed funds. Can You help? Phone Joyce 649045 or Kathryn 648140