

The parable of the talents * Matthew 25:14-30

November 12, 2023 * Langford Community Church * Graham Gladstone

You all know Pastor Doug, right? He was just here a few weeks back and has spoken here a handful of other times.

Years ago, Julie and I went to his church in Kingston and I remember there was this one Sunday where they decided to do this really creative service project. The idea was: they gave everybody a five dollar bill in a red envelope and told us to go out and use that five dollars to be a blessing to someone in need. I think there was some suggestion too that maybe people could get creative with their money and invest it or turn it into more money through a bake sale or something so that the value of the ministry would be greater than the sum of all the five dollar bills.

I'm a little bit ashamed to say that if you looked in my Bible from that time, you would probably still find a red envelope with a five dollar bill in it.

I did not make very good use of what I'd been given.

And that's actually the issue at the heart of the parable that we're going to look at today. Matthew 25, starting in verse 14. In this parable, Jesus tells us that God has given each of us good and valuable gifts; the question is 'what are we doing with what we've been given?'

Turn with me to Matthew 25:14 and I'll show you what I mean. Matthew 25:14, the parable of the talents.ⁱ

14 "Again, it will be like a man going on a journey..."

This is a callback to last week's message. Jesus is pointing us back to the previous parable which tells us that Jesus is coming again and that we need to be ready. 'Again,' He says 'this parable describes another aspect of My return.'

So '[when I return...] it will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted his property to them.

15 To one he gave five talents of money, to another two talents, and to another one talent, each according to his ability. Then he went on his journey.

I kind of wish that the people who translated the Bible had used a different word here – talent. Because this 'talent' is not like a skill or ability or whatever. 'Talent' is just a transliteration of the Greek word – they just pulled the sounds over from Greek into English and now you've got your word. And English 'talent' comes from this word 'talenton.' But as you might imagine, in Jesus' context, a 'talent' was a unit of money. You know how we have toonies and loonies and fifty dollar and hundred dollar bills; they had currency like that too. And a talent was actually the largest unit of financial measurement in Jesus' time.ⁱⁱ A talent though was worth a lot more than a hundred dollars; a talent was equivalent to about 20 years income at \$50,000 a year. Imagine putting that in your coin purse. A million dollars!

So, a few observations:

1. This guy is very wealthy. He has not just ONE talent to give out; he has MANY talents to give out. And

2. 'Give them out' he does! Verse 14. He called his servants together and **entrusted his property to them**. 'Here, you have one million dollars and you have two million dollars and you have five million dollars;' imagine being those servants who have next to nothing of their own money and the boss comes along and says 'you're instantly wealthy' so that I can be even more wealthy. And

3. He gives out his resources in proportion to what he thinks his servants are capable of. Verse 15: 'each according to his ability.' The expectation here is that the servants will carefully steward the master's property and make a reasonable return on it, but he doesn't ask anyone more than what they're capable of. He doesn't expect the one talent guy to come back with ten; he doesn't expect the five talent guy to come back with a hundred. He says 'I know what you're capable of and I'm trusting you with my property accordingly.' So get out there and invest that money. And get out there they did.

Because of a weird numbering decision when they put the numbers into the Bible, it's a little hard to see this in English but verse 16 doesn't just say 'The man who received the talents;' it literally says IMMEDIATELY...

16 The man who had received the five talents went (not just 'he went out at once') at once and put his money to work and gained five more.

IMMEDIATELY, he went out and put his money to work and gained five more. Frederick Bruner is helpful here. He writes "this servant is so thrilled to have been entrusted with his master's gifts that without a moment's loss he wants to throw himself into their use."ⁱⁱⁱ

Clearly, the boss's estimation of this man was right on. He got out there, threw himself into the work and doubled the master's property.

17 So also, the one with the two talents gained two more.

Again, the boss knew what he was doing. He entrusted the five talent guy with five talents and he made ten. He entrusted the two talent guy with two and he made four. The second guy was not less valuable than the first; in proportion to his ability he accomplished the exact same thing as the first guy.

But then, there's the last guy. Verse 18:

18 But [so we know there's a contrast here] the man who had received the one talent went off, dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money.

Now, there ARE rabbinic sources from this era that say that burying your money in a hole is the best way to take care of your money over a long period of time.^{iv} That's how the treasure got there in the parable of the treasure.

But I don't think ScotiaBank would recommend that as a way to take care of money. And given the fact that the other two servants invested the money to make more, I don't think this guy understood the assignment. He just stuck his money in a hole.

19 "After a long time the master of those servants returned and settled accounts with them. (They had to account for what they had done).

20 The man who had received the five talents brought the other five. 'Master,' he said, 'you entrusted me with five talents. See, I have gained five more.'

I want you to listen carefully to this first servant. Listen to his tone. 'Master, you entrusted me with five talents!' You get the impression that he understands what a generous responsibility this master has given to him. The master was not stingy. The master threw open the coffers and said 'here, I have five million dollars – I want you to take care of it.' He understands that the master trusts him. And he shows himself to be trustworthy. He does the work. And in the end, the man is proud of his work. 'You entrusted me with five talents! See I have gained five more!' I wish that MY investment bankers would get me that kind of return! He knows that he has done good work with the money the master entrusted to him.

And the master knew it too. Verse 21:

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 happiness!'"

The master overflows with approval and appreciation. He recognizes what a good job this guy has done and gives him even more responsibility. And in effect, 'come and share your master's happiness' is an invitation to not just be the master's servant but the master's partner in the good work they are doing. "Well done, good and faithful servant. Bask with me in the joy of a job well done."

That was the first servant; what about the second one?

22 "The man with the two talents also came. 'Master,' he said, 'you entrusted me with two talents; see, I have gained two more.'

Again, listen to the tone. It's exactly the same as the first servant. Literally, it's exactly the same; he says exactly the same thing.

And the master too says exactly the same thing in response:

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 happiness!'"

It doesn't matter that he did it with less; he receives the same commendation and the same invitation to share in the joy of the master in light of this job well done.

But then, verse 24:

24 "Then the man who had received the one talent 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 talent in the ground. See, here is what belongs to you.'

I've always assumed that this guy was accurately describing the master here but it struck me this week that we have no reason to trust his description of the master. He saw the other guys doubling the money and stuck his in a hole. And if you think about it, the way that he talks about the master doesn't

really fit with the way the first two servants do. He doesn't seem to recognize the privilege and honour that the master has extended to him; he doesn't say anything about the master trusting him. Have you ever had coworkers who talk trash about the boss to you and you think 'Our boss isn't that bad; he just wants us to work hard.'

That's this guy. Verse 25: 'I was afraid and went out and hid your talent so here it is.'

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? (One commentator, Douglas O'Donnell, suggests that we read this as sarcasm).^{vi}

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 " 'Take the talent from him and give it to the one who has the ten talents.

29 For everyone who has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him.

30 And throw that worthless servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'

In the world of the parable, the servants who made good use of the master's property are rewarded and celebrated; the servant who did not loses everything. He goes from being a guy who has access to a million dollars to a guy who is regretting everything as he sits in the darkness.

I don't know about you but I want to avoid that fate; I want to be a good and faithful servant, so let's pull these ideas from the world of the parable into our own.

The man who entrusted his property to his servants and then went away on a long journey, who does that represent? It's God. In this parable, Jesus teaches us that our God is a good and gracious Master who generously shares His infinite resources with us. His Kingdom, His property, His power, He generously shares these with us (whether we trust Him or not) and asks us to steward them faithfully while He is not physically here.

There will, however, be a time when He returns and Jesus tells us here that we will all need to give an account for what we have done with God's good and gracious gifts. 'The Son of Man will come to judge the living and the dead' and at that time, we'll have to account for what we've done with what we've been given.

If we have faithfully stewarded God's good gifts, then He will say to us 'well done good and faithful servant, enter into my joy forever.'

If we have not, if we have used God's gifts only for our own benefit, He will say 'I don't even know you' and cast us out into darkness, away from His presence.

So here's the question:

What are you doing with what you've been given?

That's the question that this parable begs us to ask.

Like the master in the parable, God gives of Himself to each of us generously. Unlike the servants in the parable though, we start with a monstrous debt of sin but when we turn from sin to trust in Jesus' sacrifice on our behalf, God forgives that debt and then gives all gracious gifts on top of it. He provides all that we need and more. We often think about this parable in terms of 'talents' – like things we're good at – but really, the talents in the parable reflect every good and perfect gift that God gives in our lives.

One commentator writes: our "...knowledge, health, strength, time, intellect, advantages, opportunities, "various responsibilities" (i.e., our jobs or vocations), perhaps people (a spouse, children, friend), and even further natural abilities (talents as we think of the word)."vii These are gifts that God has given for us to take care of faithfully.

We don't often think about it, but all of these things ultimately belong to the Lord. They are His gifts and His doing and He entrusts them to us with the expectation that we will steward them well.

When we enjoy them and appreciate them and think about how we can invest in them for the benefit of the Kingdom of God, God will ultimately say to us on the threshold of eternity: 'Well done good and faithful servant; enter into the joy of the Lord forever.'

When we think of them as strictly our belongings and do nothing to invest in the Kingdom, God will say 'I don't even know you; kick him out into the darkness!'

What are you doing with what you've been given?

What are you good at? What talents, abilities, interests do you have?

Who looks up to you or looks to you for guidance?

Who benefits from the example you set?

What unspoken advantages do you have because of who you are living in a relatively well-off part of the Western world?

How are your finances?

How can you take care of these gifts to glorify God and benefit His Kingdom?

Here's what I want you to take home today:

Make good use of God's good gifts and you will hear Him say 'well done, good and faithful servant; enter into the joy of the Lord forever.'

I remember the first time I ever heard those words; I'm pretty sure it was my grandpa's funeral. 'Well done good and faithful servant, enter into my joy forever.'

That's all I want to hear. That's all I want is to stand before the throne and hear Jesus say 'Well done, good and faithful servant.'

And so I want to make good use of God's good gifts.

I want to appreciate that all that I have is from Him. My time, my strength, my abilities, my money – a talent IS after all a unit of money – I want to appreciate that these are not just ‘things I have’ but gifts that God has entrusted to me that I can reinvest for the benefit of the Kingdom.

And not like the last servant, who saw the Master as a hard and brutal taskmaster, as someone to be feared; I want to live like the first servants who recognized what a gracious and generous Master they had to entrust such valuable treasures to people like them! Jesus is a gracious and generous Master who has entrusted His Kingdom to us; I want to faithfully steward all that He has given.

Make good use of God’s good gifts (and you will hear Him say ‘well done good and faithful servant’).

If you think back to last week, to the parable that comes just before this one, you’ll remember that we learned that Jesus IS planning to come back and when we returns, there will be a party to end all parties that stretches into eternity. Those who are ready, get into the party; those who aren’t are cast into darkness. The crucial question then is this – what do we do to get ready?

This parable answers that question. How do we live while we watch and wait for Jesus? We faithfully take the gifts that God has given and treasure them as the gifts that they are and use them in such a way as to give glory to God.

Waiting for Jesus is not a passive sitting around but an active engagement in the Kingdom that sees us take all that we receive and put it to use for the glory of God.^{viii}

Let’s pick one thing – maybe it’s literally a talent. Maybe it’s money. Maybe it’s a position of authority. How can you steward that gift to glorify God and advance His Kingdom?

Make good use of God’s good gifts and you will hear Him say ‘Well done, good and faithful servants; enter into the joy of the Lord forever.’

Prayer

I recognize that ‘Make good use of God’s good gifts’ is a pretty abstract concept. It’s hard to nail down exactly what that looks like for everyone. But I know that it is a call that applies to each and every one of us. So Spirit, help us to apply this idea in our own lives. Show us what are the good gifts that God has given to us. Help us to see those gifts AS gifts. And give us insight into how we can invest them for Your glory and the advancement of the Kingdom. Just like the master in the parable, you have given us collectively millions of dollars, time, health, opportunity, responsibility, authority; show us how to make a good return on that investment. And thank you for the promise of eternity.

ⁱ Alternate intro: If I could change one thing about this series on the parables, I think that I would push last week's parable and this week's parable and next week's parable back a couple of weeks so that we could talk about them during Advent.

Advent, of course, is the time when we think about Jesus' first coming, at Christmas, but we think about Jesus' first coming in order to help us to prepare for His second coming.

And in last week's parable, we heard Jesus say that He IS coming back, and that there will be a party to end all parties at the end of this age, and those who are ready to get into the party those who are not don't. Which of course begs the question 'well, then how do we get ready?' I want to be ready when Jesus returns; I want YOU to be ready too.

Last week I gave you a pretty basic answer to that question, but to be completely honest, I think that Jesus' answer is this week's parable and next week's. Jesus told these parables to answer that question – how do we get ready for Jesus' second coming? What do we do with our time while we watch and wait for His return?

ⁱⁱ See for example Craig Blomberg, *Preaching the Parables*, 199 or Ben Witherington, *Matthew* (Smith and Helwys), 462.

ⁱⁱⁱ Frederick Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary: The Churchbook, Matthew 13-28*, 554.

^{iv} Bruner, 556.

^v Doug O'Donnell points out that the servant is rewarded for his faithful stewardship in three ways:

1. He gains the master's praise. 'Well done good and faithful servant!' In a time when you could treat your servants like furniture, this was high praise.
2. He is rewarded with more responsibility. The master says 'I can entrust you with five; now I've got ten and you can take care of that.' 'I will put you in charge of many things.'
3. He is invited not simply to be a servant but to be a partner with the master and share in the joy of a job well done. Doug O'Donnell, *Matthew* (Preach the Word Commentary), 'The rewards of the righteous,' digital.

^{vi} O'Donnell, 'Crime and punishment' section, Olive Tree digital.

^{vii} O'Donnell, 'The start of the story' section, Olive Tree digital.

^{viii} Cf. Bruner, 555.