

## The Parable of the Talents

a sermon by the Rev. Michael Gladish  
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“(The Lord) 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 ability; and immediately he went on a journey.” (Matthew 25:14-15)

This morning we have the pleasure of reviewing a well known Gospel story with a number of surprising elements to it, including a surprise ending that beautifully expresses a critical teaching about heavenly life and how we can prepare for it.

We call it “the parable of the talents.” You know the gist of it: a man clearly representing the Lord gives each of his three servants a different amount of money - silver actually - and then leaves them to go, literally, abroad. While he is away the one who got the most money “went and traded with it” and earned an equal amount again. So did the one who got the lesser amount. But the one who got the least was afraid to risk using his money and so he hid it in the ground and simply returned what had been entrusted to him without any interest. We’ll review the master’s response to all this in a moment.

First, though, let’s get a few things clear about the story. In the old translation, and even in the New King James, which we generally use, the parable begins saying, “The kingdom of heaven is like a man traveling to a far country.” But it is not the kingdom that is referred to, it is the Lord Himself. The words, “kingdom of heaven” are all in Italics, which in cases like this means that they are added by the translator, and not in the original Greek. In fact the story follows a very particular lesson about when the Son of Man would come in judgment of the world and the reference clearly is to HIM, that is, the Lord.

Secondly, let’s be clear about the talent. It’s a great word in English because it suggests any gift or ability that God may give us, but in the original context it is a specific amount of silver, measured in weight and equaling approximately 6,000 denarii or 6,000 days’ wages. Plainly speaking, that would be about 20 years’ earnings, no less than half a million dollars in today’s western market even for unskilled labor. So, number one, we’re talking about a very wealthy land owner, and number two, we’re talking about a very large commitment of trust in his servants: one got the equivalent of at least 2 ½ million dollars, another got about a million, and even the one who got the least got around half a million – nothing to sneeze at.

And the symbolism is not to be missed: the Lord is indeed VERY wealthy, especially in the truths of His own Word, which silver specifically represents. And He gives each of us all we can possibly use – according to our ability.

But now, what do we do with it?

The first servant in the story “went and traded with the talents” and doubled his money. So when the master returned he said, “Well done, good and faithful servant; you were faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things.”

A few things!!? – 2 ½ million dollars? For most of US that would be a LOT. But let's see the thing in context. First of all, as the Lord said, "What is a man profited if he gains *the whole world* and loses his own soul?" (Matthew 16:26). Material goods are, literally, nothing compared to eternal life. But beyond this, silver in the Word stands for the truth itself of the Word, and a servant not only represents each one of us but in particular our intellectual or understanding faculty, our capacity to *work with the truth*. But the truth, as vital and important as it is, still only serves the good for which it stands. In other words, our gift from the Lord is the truth of His Word, and we are to work with that truth, *trading with it* in our exchange of ideas so that we can learn how to live a genuinely good life. But in the end it's the life that counts, and so the truth, as a means to the end, is like "a few things" compared to many.

And here's one of the big surprises in the story: where it says "I will make you ruler over many things" the traditional understanding is that when we "earn" the reward of heaven then, after death, we will get to take it easy, lording it over other people rather than doing any further work ourselves. You may remember the Lord being confronted by His disciples, James and John, with just this proposition: they wanted to sit at His right and left hands when He entered into His glory and, evidently, rule with Him over all other people. But the Lord said, "...it shall not be so among you; *but whoever desires to become great among you shall be your servant. And whoever desires to be first shall be the slave of all*" (Mark 10:43-44).

What, then, is this "ruling over many things?" Well, literally, the words are "I will appoint you over," in other words, "give you responsibility" for many things. The whole point of this reward is NOT that the servant should kick back and do nothing, but that he should get *even more responsibility!* And why? – because it is the delight of his life to be useful and to serve other people. This is the quality of life that we are to cultivate through the "trading" or commerce of ideas that increases our knowledge and understanding of the truth – that we may serve others by helping to enrich their lives.

Think of a purely material illustration. A businessman may run his business with any number of ends in view, one of which is to make money and live a comfortable life. But if he is a good man one of his chief concerns will be the welfare of his employees, and he will do everything he can to bring out their best and to give them a good quality of life even as he, through his company, provides a quality product or service for others. If he enjoys this and learns to do it well he will thrive on it and welcome the opportunity to do it more and more, so the reward will actually be that opportunity – the opportunity to serve more and more people.

And that, in a nutshell, is heaven. It is NOT about ruling, or just sitting around as if on clouds eating grapes or playing harps. It is about the joy and delight of being useful, taking responsibility, serving others.

We all have a long way to go, don't we? And yet we all intuitively recognize this fact. None of us feels very comfortable for very long without feeling useful, or needed, or at least appreciated for what we can contribute to society. This is why the elderly so often languish; if they don't find new ways to be useful when their physical abilities fail them they feel lost and get very discouraged. This, too, is often a contributing factor in violent behaviour: it is a way of getting attention when nothing else seems to work, when what we do isn't appreciated.

But consider the second servant. He didn't get as much as the first one but he also got a lot - the rough equivalent of a million dollars. Still, it's not really the million that's important in the story, it's the fact that the amount was two talents. Just as five represents a handful, sometimes a little and sometimes a lot, two represents the partnership or conjunction of two things, usually – on a spiritual plane – what is good and what is true. And here the point is that even though the *amount* was less than the amount given to the first servant, it still represented all that was necessary to be productive and useful – and the servant did use it well.

The story is a little reminiscent of another parable the Lord told - about three groups of workers who were hired at different times of the day but who at the end of the day were all paid the same - a full day's wages (Matt. 20). The point is that it's not nearly so much what we do as it is the attitude we bring that defines the quality of the work. In that story ALL the men wanted to work, and the wages paid represent the reward of being able to do so.

So in the parable of the talents the second servant was rewarded equally with the first.

But the third servant was afraid and determined not to risk anything by putting his talent to use. And this part of the story is particularly loaded with application for us. First of all, why was he afraid? The Lord says that it was because he “knew” the master was “a hard man, reaping where he had not sown, and gathering where he had not scattered seed.” And it is critical to note that this speaks to *our perception* of the truth, not the truth itself. Remember, the master represents the Lord, our infinitely wise and loving God, and He simply is *not like this*. But in our troubled states He can seem this way to us, and so it may be how we “know” Him, even though it is not how He really is. [The psychology in the Word is tremendous, by the way, and the teachings of this church really help us to understand it!]

This is how it was with the Jews of the Old Testament, which is why they often referred to God as “angry,” “jealous,” vengeful or destructive. The real reason is because that's the way THEY were, and so that's the way they perceived their God.

Thus the Lord called the third servant “wicked and lazy,” and despite his excuses had him thrown out “into outer darkness.”

Can we not easily relate to this whole scene? First, think of the fear. Isn't it true that we also fear the responsibility of sharing the truth with our neighbors? After all, what if we mess up? Not only will we look foolish but we may cause the truth itself to lose value in other people's eyes, perhaps even in our own eyes as we fumble to explain it. Thus our temptation is just to keep it to ourselves – to go about our business without saying much about our faith, or, worse, to live without really even trying to apply our faith, believing that our faith alone is all we need.

No doubt you know that “the earth” in Scripture represents the church. So when Ezekiel saw the vision of a great stone, uncut with human hands, filling the earth, this was not a representation of the church literally filling the earth, it was a representation of the acknowledgment of the truth about the Lord filling the CHURCH, in fact the NEW church that would have that acknowledgment. So that particular passage is not so much a teaching about what we should deliver to others as it is a teaching about what we must cultivate in ourselves! Seen in this light the action of the third servant to “bury his talent in the earth” is a warning to us lest we decline to engage in

the spiritual commerce of life by means of which the truths can be multiplied in our minds.

You see, trading in Scripture relates to spiritual goods and truths. It has to do with reflection and discussion, the exchange of ideas. In fact it is ironic that the standard translation of the parable declares that the servant should have deposited his money with the bankers, so that he could at least have gained interest. But interest (called usury), strictly speaking, was forbidden to the Jews, and the word, bankers, literally only means “those at tables,” suggesting a market-place. Further, the word translated “interest” really just means “increase.” So what we’re seeing in the parable is a failure to invest spiritually, a failure to make USE of the truth to enrich ourselves and others lives by sharing it, discussing it and putting it to work in the give and take of everyday life.

This of course is the easy way of belonging to the church – just get the truth and keep it: hold onto it; hide it; bury it *lest it be devalued in the market-place*. At least, we think, this way no harm will come to the truth, and we ourselves will be subject to no risk.

But real faith doesn’t work this way. Real faith involves risk and personal investment every day. Yes, sometimes we will make mistakes, even lose some credibility as we struggle to share what the Lord has given us. But we will *learn* from our mistakes and get better! Indeed, just as the Lord encouraged His first disciples not to worry about what they should say when called to testify, but to trust that the right words would be given to them, so we need to quit worrying about how much we don’t know, or how much we have to lose, and just put ourselves out there. Share AND listen. Give AND take. Buy and sell. Trade. Cultivate and use the wisdom the Lord has given us, even if it isn’t as much as someone else may have. Again, it’s not what we have that counts, it’s what we DO with what we have that counts.

So the Lord affirms the old saying, “Use it or lose it.” The servant who buried his talent not only lost the talent but he lost his life as well, which symbolically tells us that if we take the lazy way out and do not cultivate the truths of the Word in our minds or share them with others in the daily work of life we will lose *our spiritual* lives as well, for we will have no capacity to receive the joy of heaven, which is, after all, the joy of useful spiritual service. And in that vein remember that the talent taken from the “wicked and lazy servant” was given to the servant who had TEN talents. This may seem terribly unfair; but as indicated earlier, those who love to serve love the opportunity to serve more and more, so the Lord said, “To everyone who has, more will be given, and he will have abundance” – more love, more wisdom, and more of the joy of heaven. “But from him who does not have, even what he has will be taken away.”

Amen.

Lessons: [Matthew 5:1-16](#)  
SS Children’s talk on the Sermon on the Mount (esp. the “be-attitudes”)

[Matthew 25:14-30](#)  
[Arcana Caelestia #5291:4](#) and [Apocalypse Explained #675:8](#)  
or - consider the whole teaching of [Conjugal Love #2-10](#)