

Discipleship in the Lectionary – 11/19/2023



A look at the week's lectionary through the lens of discipleship and disciple-making.

Revised Common Lectionary Year A

Sunday, November 19th

Matthew 25:14-30

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Where are you holding back?

This week's lectionary text presents another parable that emphasizes the end times and the Second Coming. Last week's Parable of the Ten Virgins stressed the need to be ready for Christ's return – to live each day as though we expect Christ to return and to not become complacent. Jesus is coming but we know not the day or the hour. This week's text is the Parable of the Talents which builds on the previous parable by providing practical guidance on *how* disciples should live in readiness for Christ's return. This parable challenges us to invest our lives in the Kingdom – careful stewardship of the talent, time, and treasure that Christ has entrusted us with. Christ demands bold and courageous action for the Kingdom rather than seeking only to minimize risk.

Matthew 25:14-30 Commentary

¹⁴ "For it will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted to them his property. ¹⁵ To one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away.

As in the Parable of the Ten Virgins, note the future tense: The Kingdom of Heaven *will be like...* The man is going on a long journey. The man represents Jesus, and the long journey represents the time before His return (the Second Coming). The man entrusted his servants with his cash property. This was a common occurrence in the patronage system where servants were given much responsibility. The servants were expected to produce returns for their master. A talent represented approximately twenty year's wages for a laborer. The servants were given different amounts of property – each was given in proportion to their master's evaluation of their ability.

¹⁶ He who had received the five talents went at once and traded with them, and he made five talents more. ¹⁷ So also he who had the two talents made two talents more. ¹⁸ But he who had received the one talent went and dug in the ground and hid his master's money.

The use of "*at once*" suggests the immediacy of the action of the first two servants thus taking no delay in exercising their stewardship and putting the master's money to work. The third servant with one talent was either unwilling to work or unwilling to take risks. He simply buried the talent in the ground to preserve it from theft.

¹⁹ Now after a long time the master of those servants came and settled accounts with them.

The return of the master after "*a long time*" symbolizes Christ's return would not be immediate. The settling of accounts represents the notion of judgment.

²⁰ And he who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five talents more, saying, 'Master, you delivered to me five talents; here, I have made five talents more.' ²¹ His master said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master.' ²² And he also who had the two talents came forward, saying, 'Master, you delivered to me two talents; here, I have made two talents more.' ²³ His master said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master.'

Both the first and second servants had doubled their master's investment. Both servants receive the same reaction from the master. Both are given more responsibility, and both share in the master's joy. When the Kingdom is finally consummated, there will be glorious new responsibilities and unimaginable joy to those that have been faithful.

²⁴ He also who had received the one talent came forward, saying, 'Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you scattered no seed, ²⁵ so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here, you have what is yours.' ²⁶ But his master answered him, 'You wicked and slothful servant! You knew that I reap where I have not sown and gather where I scattered no seed? ²⁷ Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and at my coming I should have received what was my own with interest. ²⁸ So take the talent from him and give it to him who has the ten talents. ²⁹ For to everyone who has will more be given, and he will have an abundance. But from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. ³⁰ And cast the worthless servant into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'

Things take a twist with the account of the third servant entrusted with one talent. The one-talent servant appears to have acted out of fear. He accuses the master of being a hard man and a thief who profits from the work of others. Why should the servant do all the work and assume all the risk? If he lost the money, he would face the master's wrath. Hence, he simply buried the talent in the ground. The third slave put his own interests ahead of his master's and even blamed the master for his own failings. Such a servant is described in the text as "worthless" and the master severs all ties with him. The servant is cast out into the outer darkness where there will be gnashing of teeth – allegory for final judgment.

Reflection and Application

In the traditional allegorical interpretation of this parable, the man going on a journey represents Jesus. His journey represents Christ's ascension. The servants represent Christ's followers awaiting His return. The talents represent blessings in the form of talent, time, and treasure which God has bestowed on us. The man's return represents the Second Coming of Christ. The settling of accounts represents final judgment.

In this parable, the master apportions his cash wealth to his servants to manage for him in a way which reflects his interpretation of their abilities. He gives them the freedom to choose what they do with the money and judges them accordingly. The irony here between "little" and "much" illustrates how even staggering worldly wealth such as five talents represents only a little relative to the vastness of God's blessings that will be bestowed on the faithful at the end of time.

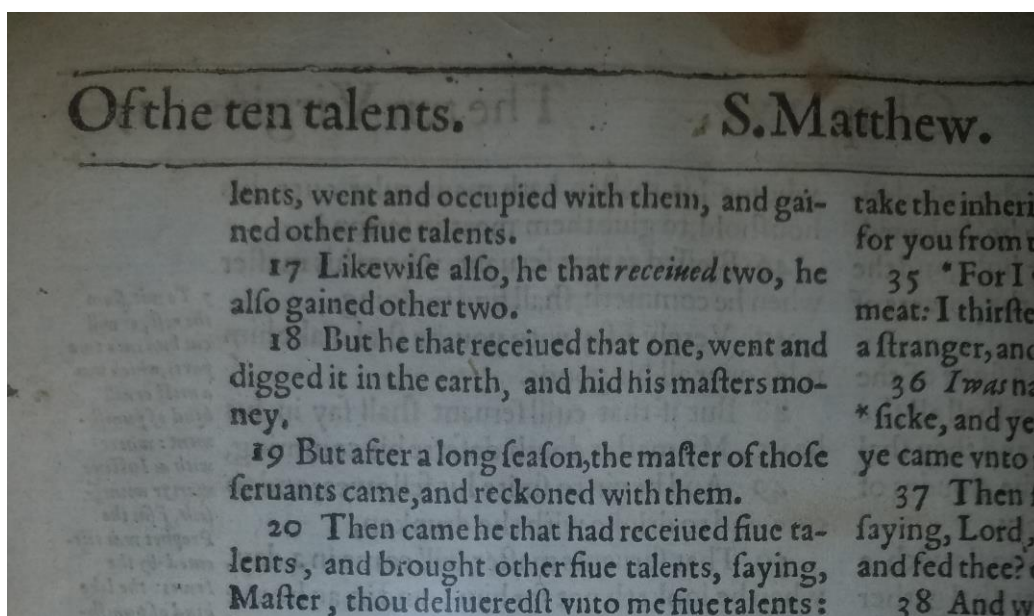
It is important to note that the third servant broke no laws. Burying wealth was an accepted way of safeguarding money. According to rabbinical law, a person who buries money in a hidden location cannot be held accountable for its loss. The law here is not the issue. The action of the three servants when given the master's wealth is differentiated in the Greek text. The first two servants "went" (*poreuomai*) "at once" (*eutheōs*). The third servant with the one talent "went" (*aperchomai*). The first two servants did not waste any time. They went away

immediately and enthusiastically to put the master's money to work. The third servant did not have the same enthusiasm. This servant appears to have walked away from the opportunity to serve his master faithfully through hard work and/or risk. The third servant was ultimately judged to be wicked, slothful, and worthless.

Recently, more liberal commentators have attempted to interpret this parable in a way that conforms to their political views on social and economic justice. Perhaps it would be more appropriate to say they are reading into the text their own moral and political views. The hero of this story, in their view, is the third servant. Matthew, they argue, is attempting to illustrate the injustice of an economic system where the few have so much wealth and can force others to work for them so that the rich grow richer and the poor become poorer. The third servant thus refuses to take risks and work for the master and then calls out the master's hypocrisy when he returns.

This parable, however, notes that the servants' ability (*dunamis* – power) differed. As a result, they were not each given 2.67 talents! Thus, the master provided his three servants with an equitable opportunity, not an equal opportunity. Unfortunately, we cannot legislate equality of talent and ability. Those attempting to subvert God's word to support one political view of economic justice may themselves be demonstrating how they have failed to be faithful over what was entrusted to them.

It appears the differentiator may come down to this: The first two servants were more concerned about the master's interests. The third servant focused more on self-interest. In a culture which highly values individual liberty and fairness, notions of loyalty and respect relative to legitimate authority are becoming an increasingly uncomfortable concept. As believers, all of us are accountable for the stewardship of the talent, time, and treasure we have been blessed with. Those that are given less are also expected to exercise Kingdom stewardship. All of us are expected to live up to our full potential – not in service of ourselves but in service of the Kingdom. We must not walk away from our calling. We must not use fear as an excuse and bury our talents and abilities. We must not quench the Holy Spirit within us. This is how we must live until Christ returns. Return He will and then the accounts will be settled.



From the Geneva Bible dated c.1611