

**PROPER 28 YEAR A  
ST LUKE'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH  
BLACKSTONE VA**

*Matthew 25:14-30*

"For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them and made five more talents. In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money. After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, 'Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents.' His master said to him, 'Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.' And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, 'Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents.' His master said to him, 'Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.' Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, 'Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; so I was

afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.' But his master replied, 'You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. So take the talent from him and give it to the one with the ten talents. For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'

Can any of us be sure which slave (slave? – some modern translators soften this to 'servant') of the three we are in this parable? The searching prior question we must all ask is, "Which talents we were given? Do we actually know? How can we find out? Have some lain buried within us, unused?"

Another question to ask might be: "How have we been equipped to serve God, and one another, by using the talent, or talents, we have been given? Have we asked God to make them apparent to us, to help us to use them aright?"

But what does this parable actually teach? What, if anything, does it convey about the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ?

A very distinguished Christian Professor of Economics preached in our Oxford College Chapel on this Gospel one

Sunday. He wisely pointed out that these verses made more sense as a lesson in venture capital than about the life and teaching of our Lord about the kingdom of God, for the coming of which Jesus taught us to pray. In fact *they are directly opposed* to the moral and spiritual principles of Matthew Chapter 25 verses 31 and following. He then read those verses to us.

Might I suggest you now look them up? That's St Matthew's Gospel, Chapter 25, verses 31 to 46: READ THOSE VERSES NOW, PLEASE.

Does anyone in this 'parable' ask God for guidance, or is this only, as it seems to be on the surface, a 'parable' about investment policy? Is this a 'parable' merely about fiscal responsibility, and how to be a responsible slave acting to escape punishment? It is the case that, however shrewd the slaves may be in investment, they remain slaves at the end of the parable.

Our Economics Professor suggested that evidently the best investment to maximize profits would be to buy more slaves like the ones who knew about making wealth grow. "Yes", he said, "The best investment if you wanted to double your money fast, would be to buy more profit-generating slaves." That is a clear lesson to draw. No, the 'parable' doesn't say how the slaves doubled their money, but if they are given as an example, why not head on down to the slave market?

Doesn't Jesus teach again and again that a really good and faithful servant of God would be one who gave the talent away to meet the needs of others for food,

clothing, shelter, medical aid (as Christ will demand at the Last Judgment). **That's St Matthew's Gospel, Chapter 25, verses 31 to 46: READ THOSE VERSES AGAIN NOW, PLEASE.**

What about us? We no longer buy and sell human beings as profit-generating property. So, I will use 'talent' in our contemporary sense of a gift of character or ability, or a privileged position in society. These gifts are unearned, undeserved, not something to boast about or use to our advantage only: the 'talents' we have been given, be they small or great, are not a matter of merit. They are a matter of character, of who we are, and how we treat others showing forth a fruitful benefit of the faith we have been given

Now: who is the forgotten figure in this parable, the one preachers overlook? Why, the master, of course. From those to whom much is given, much will be required. He hands out his money, the parable says, according to what he already knew was the relative ability of his slaves to make more. AND he insisted that the one-talent slave should have given the talent to the bankers to get interest. Doesn't everyone know that throughout almost all Christian history, usury, lending money at interest, was a sin??? No disrespect to bankers, but for Jesus' hearers, the master tells the slave he should have sinned by lending money at interest: usury.

What talent *does* this reveal that the master had? Did he use his talent to enhance the lives of others or merely to enrich himself? A talent is used as in the parable: a large sum of money. Did the master himself earn it all fairly or

inherit it? The frightened slave who was given just one talent is never contradicted: "I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed."

The vulnerable slave knows that the master is harsh, cruel, and a money-grubber. The master cannot stand for God in this parable, can he? And have you yet read those next verses in Matthew 25, the ones that come right after this unedifying story?

True, by ignoring the 'parable', it is possible to extract one lovely verse, "Well done, good and trustworthy slave." Preachers usually take that verse and lead us to hope that, at the Last Judgment, God will say it to us. Now, that is a lovely thought. The rest of the morally indigestible parable teaches nothing that would lead our Good God to praise us in such a way.

I remind us all that Jesus died to set us *free* from our slavery to sins such as avarice. St Paul teaches us again and again that we are no longer slaves to greed, we are set free from sin to love and serve the Lord. Now read John 8: 36, or any number of verses in the Epistles of St Paul: Romans, 1 Corinthians, Ephesians, or just go straight to Galatians 3:28. We are *free*: not slaves to another's desire to enslave others in greed. The one-talent slave may be cast out into Matthean darkness. He may weep and gnash his teeth for a while. After that, he may stand up straight and walk away: he has been set free. Free as a Christian.

And yet. These verses are there in St Matthew's Gospel. The teaching may require us to think a bit, to dig a bit in search of meaning. As we do so, we may discover a hitherto hidden talent to guide us in our study of the Gospel. And more important still, how to live the Gospel as well as interpret it.

Thanks be to our heavenly Father, and to Jesus Christ our Lord.

Your priest and friend,  
John+

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