

“EXTREME BEHAVIORS”
1 Thessalonians 5:1-11; Matthew 25:14-30
A Sermon by John Thomason
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I’ll go ahead and admit it – I often empathize with characters in the Bible who are easy to criticize. My heart goes out to scoundrels like King Ahab, who never meets an idol he doesn’t like; and Pontius Pilate, who is cowardly to the core; and Judas Iscariot, who betrays Jesus for a quick buck. I empathize with them because I know my own capacity for being a scoundrel.

I especially relate to figures like Moses and Jeremiah and Jonah, who are obviously good and gifted men, but who initially resist God’s call to speak truth to power because they feel inadequate and fearful. I empathize with them because I too have sometimes taken the path of least resistance and remained silent in the face of wrongdoing. In sum, I identify with biblical characters who show signs of weakness, who want to play it safe instead of standing strong, for on occasion I have done the same. Who am I to cast the first stone?

Which brings me to one of our favorite whipping boys in the Scriptures – the slave in Jesus’ parable of the talents who is given one talent and chooses to bury it rather than invest it. It’s important to know that the “talent” Jesus speaks about here is not an aptitude or a skill – like the talent for cooking French cuisine or singing solos in church. In the ancient Near East, a talent refers to a huge sum of money, the equivalent to five years of wages for a common laborer. For an employer to give an employee the gift of even one talent would be a bonus to end all bonuses.

The employer in this story is going on a journey for an indefinite period of time. He takes the daring step of entrusting his property, not to his relatives as one might expect, but to his servants, whom the parable clearly identifies as slaves. He gives five talents to one slave and two talents to another. They end up making wise investments that double their money. He gives only one talent to a third slave, who takes the cautious, conservative approach and buries his gift for safe-keeping, sort of like hiding cash underneath a mattress rather than putting it into a bank account – or far better, investing it in a money market where it can multiply in value.

Now, it’s easy to criticize the third slave for his short-sightedness; but, quite frankly, I empathize with him. You see, I’m a one-talent guy, whether we’re talking about possessing money or possessing skill. I’ve never been a wealthy man, nor ever aspired to be; and what money I’ve had, I’ve spent carefully and invested cautiously. And my “talents” are strictly limited in other areas, too. God gave me the gift for doing pastoral ministry, but that’s about it. I’m not handy or artistic; I love music but don’t know a C-flat from an F-sharp; I love sports but was never more than an average athlete. I look with admiration and amazement at people who are multi-talented, who are good at their paying jobs – whether it’s teaching school or being a sales clerk or managing a corporation – but who are also skilled at carpentry or sewing or competing in triathlons. I identify with the man in Jesus’ parable who is given only one talent, and I find it hard to blame him for playing it close to the vest. After all, if I’m given only one talent, I don’t want to risk losing it.

And I’ll be honest about something else: the person in this parable I really want to criticize is the master. He returns home unexpectedly, asks for an accounting from the three men to whom

he entrusted his property, and then lowers the boom on the man who buried his one talent. The master is not just judgmental toward this poor guy; he is downright vindictive.

For starters, he seizes the slave's one talent and gives it to the man whose five talents have now become ten. The master then offers a kind of proverb to justify what he has done: "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" (Matthew 25:29). We sometimes hear these words spoken in cynicism, very much like, "Them that has gets," or "The rich get richer and the poor get poorer." In this instance, the master is not being cynical; he is drawing a general moral lesson from this specific situation, saying in effect that gifts unused will atrophy, but gifts exercised will increase.

In any case, the master's response comes across as harsh, and it only gets harsher. He instructs his employees to cast the one-talent guy "into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (v. 30). Does that strike you as it does me as an over-reaction, as an example of extreme behavior? Measured against New Testament standards of mercy and generosity, the master's judgment is offensive, even scandalous.

What makes it even more scandalous is that this parable can be read as an allegory – a story in which each of the characters represents someone else. Don't miss the fact that Jesus tells this parable just before he goes to Jerusalem, where he will die and be raised from the dead and then return to his Father in heaven. He will leave the disciples behind to be stewards of his kingdom work here on earth. So, up to this point, Jesus seems to be likening the master in the parable to himself, as one who is about to depart on a journey and leave his servants in charge of his operation.

So far, so good. But what are we to make of the master's actions when he returns from his journey and assesses his servants' stewardship – especially when he judges so harshly the servant who buried his one talent? Is Jesus himself like that? In today's Epistle lesson from 1 Thessalonians, the apostle Paul warns that "the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night" and bring "sudden destruction" to those who are unprepared (1 Thessalonians 5:2-3). So, in this parable, is Jesus giving us a sneak preview of the final judgment? Is he saying that when he returns to earth, he will hold us accountable for our stewardship and reject those of us whose performances were lacking? This picture of a judgmental Jesus is scandalous to many of us; it just doesn't square with "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so."

Perhaps the master's extreme reaction to the third servant can be put in context by his even more extreme behavior at the beginning of this parable. You and I tend to be shocked by the closing lines of the story, but not shocked by the opening line. The kingdom of heaven, says Jesus, "is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them" (v. 14). This is some kind of master, some kind of slavery! Can you imagine it? The master calls in these men who have no status and no rights, who are his personal property, and gives them everything he's got. The key to his Cadillac; the key to his wine cellar; his personal identification number to his bank account, and his stock portfolio – everything. You talk about extreme behavior!

I remind you again that Jesus shares this parable toward the end of his earthly ministry. On his way to the cross, he tells a story about a Lord and master who calls in his servants and gives them everything he has. Jesus is on his way to Calvary to give away everything he has. Does that

put the master's anger in context? He gives his slaves everything, and it is only right that he expects them to produce something with what they've been given.

Years ago, a college student nearly flunked out one semester. He had been living the party life, and his grades suffered accordingly. These were the days before cellphones, so he spoke to his mother on the telephone in the hallway of his dormitory. His roommate could overhear what was being said, and it was obvious that the student's mother was really giving him some grief. But in a later conversation with his roommate, the student put his mother's disappointment and anger in perspective. He said that he was the first person in his family ever to go to college. His mother not only worked at a very difficult job during the day, but she had taken a cleaning job at night in order to pay for his college expenses. That really puts his goofing off in context, doesn't it? She was working twice as hard to put him through college as he was working in college. She had a right to be angry.

And doesn't the master in this parable? He who has given everything has a right to be angry with a miserly, overly-cautious servant. And so, a parable that had me asking, "Master, how could you do this to that servant?" now has me asking, "Master, how could I do this to you and to the sacrifice you made for me?"

Look at us gathered here today, in our pews or around our computer screens. We are a bunch of ordinary people, to be sure. And yet, this parable says that something extraordinary has been done to us. Jesus has given us the keys to the kingdom; he has entrusted us to be stewards of his ongoing work here on earth; he has given each of us spiritual gifts with which to do this work. So now Jesus calls for an accounting; he passes judgment, he poses a question: what have you done with what I have given you?

Bishop Will Willimon tells about woman who had only one special talent, from what he could see. God gave her the talent of being a phenomenal baker of oatmeal cookies. She was legendary for her oatmeal cookies, at least in her neighborhood. But she never baked a batch of oatmeal cookies for her family or friends without expanding the recipe and making a batch for the prisoners at the county prison camp. She tied these cookies in little packages, and in her graceful handwriting wrote, "I know you are going through a rough time. But God loves you. God wants to be with you."

Being able to make good oatmeal cookies is not a huge talent. But when used in service to others, it can be a marvelous gift. It can be a sign of the inbreaking kingdom of God. It can be an ordinary glimpse of the extraordinary graciousness of God in Jesus Christ. When there is an accounting, a reckoning, I fully expect our Lord and Master to say, as the tally is submitted for all those oatmeal cookies, "Well done, good and faithful servant, enter into the joy of your Master" (v. 21). And I also expect, when there is an accounting, for the master to ask me a simple but very basic question: "What have you done with what I have given you?"

Angelina and Sarah Grimke were sisters who grew up in the antebellum South and later moved to the Northeast, where they became antislavery activists and leaders of the early women's movement in America. They came from a privileged household in Charleston, South Carolina. They were raised to be cultured, but uninvolved Southern upper-class ladies.

The great change in Angelina Grimke's life came when she heard the parable of the talents in church one day. She went home after church and sat in her chair thinking to herself, over and

over again: “What have you done with the talents committed to your care?” That question led to a dramatic change in her life, a change that helped change an entire nation.

I’m telling you, this can be a powerful parable. It might even lead to some extreme behaviors of your own.