

# *Stories with Intent*

## THE PARABLES OF JESUS



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# The Parable of the Talents

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**“Enter the joy of your master.”** This phrase, perhaps more than any other verse, serves as a theme for interpreting the parable of the talents. Other themes are possible, of course, and have been used frequently in the history of interpretation. For example, this parable has been a favorite text for stewardship and good financial practices. But when we use the parable of the talents in this one-sided way, we miss the profounder implications that it proposes for both grace and judgment.

At stake here is the future and what we willingly risk for the sake of the future that we say belongs to God. It calls us to live not by the threat of fear but in the promise of hope, trusting in God both now and into the future. The parable challenges us to emulate our Master by using all that God has given us for the sake of the kingdom, becoming the persons God has gifted us to be and offering to others what we have received. For the joy of the master is a joy that is self-giving, sharing, and spread into the world.

### **Background/Context**<sup>1</sup>

The definition we know of “talent” referring to human ability was derived from this parable, and, even though people interpreted “talent” in connection with ability much earlier, this use of the word did not emerge until the fifteenth century. For modern readers this meaning is at least distracting and potentially misleading.

A talent in the ancient world was neither a skill nor a God-given ability. It was a monetary weight of approximately 60 to 90 pounds. Depending on the metal in question, the value of a talent was equivalent to 6000 days’ wages for a day laborer (roughly twenty years’ work), so the man given five talents was given an enormous sum. Obviously the “one talent” man still had an enormous amount of money as well. It’s the kind of money that people wish they had in their retirement accounts, not amounts you would keep in your wallet.

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<sup>1</sup> Klyne Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus* (527-28)

### **Hearing the Parable (Matthew 25:14-30)**<sup>2</sup>

The parable is located in Jesus' discourse on present and future circumstances (24:1-25:46) where he instructs his disciples to endure through difficult times and to live in anticipation of the Lord's return. Like all the parables in this section, **it exemplifies the certainty of the Lord's coming and how the disciples are to live in the meantime.**

The teaching of the talents recalls the parable of the faithful and wise slave who continues to do the work of the master until the master comes (24:45-51). Although the master is delayed, he arrives to find the wise slave doing the tasks that have been appointed to him in the master's absence.

The foolish slave, however, has neglected his work and abused his power. He receives severe punishment. Likewise, in the parable of the talents, the master entrusts his servants with his property, and punishment awaits those who have failed to carry on the master's work.

Like the parable of the ten maidens before it, the parable of the talents portrays the kingdom of God (25:14). The kingdom is not simply likened to a man on a journey, but to the story that follows — a story that illustrates **how the disciples are to wait until the Lord comes.**

In this story a wealthy man prepares for a journey by entrusting his estate to his servants. In Luke's version of this parable (Luke 19:12-27), ten slaves receive one pound a piece to do the master's business. In Matthew's version, however, there are only three servants, and they receive shares according to their ability (25:15).

Although the first receives five times as much as the last, each receives a significant sum of money. A talent is equal to about 6,000 denarii. Since one denarius is a common laborer's daily wage, a talent would be roughly equivalent to 20 years wages for the average worker. Five talents, the largest amount entrusted to any of the servants, is comparable to 100 years worth of labor, an astronomical amount of money.

Like the preceding two parables (24:45-51; 25:1-13), the return of the master is certain (or at least implied), but the timing is unknown. After a long absence, he discovers what each servant has done with his property. The first two slaves do business with the master's talents and double his money. Although the first slave earned more than the second, each has done remarkably well with what he has been given. They have performed according to their potential, and they have been faithful to do what the master has required of them. The master's response to each is the same. He commends the slaves for being good and faithful, entrusts them with more authority, and invites them to enter his "joy."

The third servant is not so fortunate. In the response of this slave, however, the audience learns even more about the master. He is a man who reaps where he does not sow and gathers where he has not scattered seed. He aggressively seeks to expand his estate and takes whatever he can wherever he can to make a profit. He even reprimands the servant for failing to invest the money with the bankers so that he might have gained interest — a practice forbidden in scripture (Exodus 22:25; Leviticus 25:35-38).

The master's willingness to earn money at the expense of others challenges any allegorical interpretation of the parable that would *directly* correlate him with Jesus character, who never acts in a manner to seek personal gain. That a wealthy landowner would behave in this manner, however, makes the story all the more compelling.

The third slave admits that he was afraid to lose the master's money. To protect himself, he buried the talent in the ground. Although this may seem odd to us today, burying treasure was quite common at this time (13:44).

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<sup>2</sup> Excepted from Carla Works and Dirk Lange, "Matthew 25:14-30"

The master is furious. He had entrusted this servant with a portion of his property in order that the slave would use his abilities — abilities that had helped the master in the past — to turn a profit for his master. This slave, however, was too afraid to take a risk — even though risky behavior was part of the master’s business. Instead, he attempted to secure his own well-being. In the end his unfaithfulness to carry on the master’s work cost him severely (25:30). The master expected the servants to continue his business, to take risks to make a profit, and to emulate his behavior. Two servants were found faithful, and they are rewarded. Their faithfulness had increased the master’s wealth and expanded his estate.

Yet if we place all the emphasis on the final scene (the judgment of the third servant), the parable becomes merely a story about judgment. If, however, we put more emphasis on the superabundant gifts as described at the beginning of the parable, we recognize the invitation to understand a deeper reality of the Kingdom of Heaven. Jesus cannot be interpreted as a hard slave-master who demands unjust practices for profit from his servants. We are forced to think of the master as inviting his servants into a fullness, a superabundance of grace that is continually offered.

**The master, already possessing the gift of the talents, is inviting his servants to share in his joy.** When the first two are finally invited to “enter the joy of their master,” they are perhaps not entering a greater fullness than before; rather, now they are able to recognize the dynamics of joy that support the gift of faith. The joy of the master is the joy of the feast that is self-giving, sharing, being distributed into the world. In this sense the interest gained on the talents is like the hundred-fold that the disciple receives when he or she gives everything away to follow Jesus. The obedience of trust is not a burden or a fearful endeavor. It is precisely the joy of discipleship in which everything is given (the gift and the interest!).

### **Applying the Parable**<sup>3</sup>

How did Jesus seek to change attitudes and behaviors with this parable? How will it change our own?

#### **♦ The issue of the parable is faithfulness in view of the present and future kingdom.**

- In its narrative setting (which begins at Matt 24:3), Jesus tells this story to his disciples to prepare them for the days ahead when their faith will be tested. This parable depicts how the disciples are to demonstrate their faithfulness in the present as they anticipate the return of the Lord.
- Teachings on this parables often deal only with themes pertaining to stewardship. Some focus on the “law of increase,” a form of positive thinking – attitudes based on a belief that abundance and success attract and produce more abundance and success...failure to use a gift/talent results in its loss. Such statements may be true, but this parable is not about positive thinking and use of abilities. The “law of increase” with which the parable is concerned (see 25:29) is **the use that one makes of the message of the kingdom.**
- **The master, already possessing the gift of the talents, graciously invites his servants to share in his joy and abundance. That he entrusts them with such abundance should move them to act.** Like the servants, we too have been entrusted with something of enormous worth. Will we play it safe and make our return no less than what God has given? Or will we live with faithfulness and trust, using all that God has given us as an investment in his kingdom, inviting others to participate in the joy of our master.

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<sup>3</sup> Snodgrass, pp. 535-38.

♦ **What can be said about the third servant and the master's reaction?**

- We've had plenty of parables about being expectant and ready. **The master expected the servants to continue his business, to take risks to make a profit, to emulate his behavior** – and the actions of the third servant reveal that he clearly expected the master to return (25:24-25).
- **This servant, however, was too afraid to take a risk — even though risk was part of the master's business.** Instead, he attempted to secure his own well-being. He not only hid the talent, he buried himself. He is not so much condemned as he condemns himself to a place — a life — that knows not joy, that knows only darkness. This place, as such a life, is self-created.
- Fear (rather than faithfulness) motivated the servant's actions. As the parable reveals, fear is inadequate for life lived in God's kingdom. **Risking for the sake of the future was the thrust of Jesus' life and his call to all who would be his disciples.** Our trust in God's kingdom, present and eventual, encourages us to let loose of fear. How better can we offer what we have been given and become the persons God has gifted us to be than by choosing to live not by the threat of fear but in the promise of hope?
- **The harsh language at the end of the parable should not be overplayed but taken for what it is — an extreme statement to force thought.** Judgment is not an attractive topic for most of us, and often we not only avoid ideas of judgment but also deemphasize moral responsibility, as if moral lessons were somehow inferior. In doing so life is cheapened, because our actions mean nothing.
- Jesus' parables, and certainly this one, do emphasize moral responsibility and carry an unavoidable announcement of judgment. Prophets use strong language, and this language functions to shock and force consideration. If the kingdom is about anything, it is about accountability to the will of the Father.
- However, if we consider the parable as **a parable of invitation**, perhaps the third servant's situation takes on a different meaning. If the master is continually inviting his servants into abundance, grace, and joy (which is nothing other than the invitation to discipleship) then the only conclusion that can be drawn is the third servant is not able to hear or accept the invitation.

♦ **Ultimately, the parable calls us to commitment to the Christ who truly is king and to faithfulness to his purposes.**

- The theme of faithfulness must be brought directly into relationship with Jesus' teaching here about the present and future kingdom. Knowledge of God's reign and salvation brings with it added responsibility. **To accept the kingdom and its salvation is to accept a trust.** It enlists one as an agent on behalf of the kingdom, and all those so enlisted will be rewarded or judged in terms of their faithfulness to their task.
- It is important to note that the same words are said to the second servant as were said to the first. Even though the first servant was entrusted with more, his reward was not greater. **The servants were judged on the basis of their faithfulness.**
- **What does faithfulness look like in a time of waiting for the Master's return? In Matthew's Gospel faithfulness is emulating the ministry of Jesus.** Jesus has announced the arrival of God's kingdom by feeding the hungry and serving the least. All who would follow Jesus are to share the good news of the kingdom to the whole world (24:14) by going about the work that the master has called them to do (24:24-51). This work includes visiting the sick and imprisoned, clothing the naked, welcoming the stranger, feeding the hungry (25:31-46). Those who are found faithful may hear their Master say, "Well done, good and faithful servant."

# Discussion

1. What is one of the biggest risks you have ever taken in life. How did it turn out?
2. Even though the first servant was entrusted with more, his reward was not greater. The servants were judged on the basis of their faithfulness. What is your reaction to this part of the parable, and why is it an important detail? What does it tell us about our own responsibility, regardless of how much (or how little) we believe God has entrusted us with?
3. What role does fear play in your actions and inactions? How does fear keep you from discovering more about God, about the future, about yourself?
4. How have you experienced God's faithful presence in the midst of fear? How has God's faithfulness given wisdom and courage to risk, to grow, to step closer toward becoming who God has gifted you to be?
5. What does it mean to be invited to share in the master's joy? Drawing from the parable, how do we experience this? What actions are necessary?
6. As we live in a time waiting for the Master's return, what does faithfulness look like in our lives and in our church community? What does it look like to invite others into the joy of the Master?