

## **“What’s in Your Wallet?”**

**– Unlimited Risk”**

**Matthew 25:14-30**

**October 10, 2021**

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***“Well done, good and trust worthy servant...”***

**- Matthew 25:21**

### **Prayer of Preparation**

In the name of the living God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Amen.

### **Sermon**

One of the stops I made during my time away on sabbatical was the Archabbey at St. Meinrad in southern Indiana – a place I that have come to enjoy and admire. The setting is picturesque, and the hospitality is a blessing. I am always thankful for the days I can spend there.

I am also grateful for the conversations I had with those who teach at St. Meinrad. One conversation was with a monk by the name of Father Adrian. We spoke at length about what it means to understand who God is and what Christianity is all about.

In our sharing, we talked about two common assumptions regarding Christianity in our world. One assumption is that Christianity is nothing more than a theory about how things are – or how things began, or how the world goes round. The other assumption is that Christianity is nothing more than a moral code. These two assumptions are widely held by the church’s critics, but they’re quite common within the church too. And one of the ways these assumptions surface is in the way we read Jesus’ parables.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This sermon gains insights from Sam Wells and his work in his book *Improvisation and the Drama of Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos and London: SPCK, 2004), 95 and 111.

## **Background on Parables**

For example, if we consider the parable of the talents, which we just read, then it is common to read the story as if it were about the way the world goes round and round. In other words, the talents mean, well, talents; they refer to human abilities. According to this view, Jesus is talking about people with extraordinary abilities like you and me, and he is telling us not to be shy about using our talents to change the world.

On the other hand, if we read the parable as a moral tale, or as a kind of Aesop's fable, then the talents clearly mean money. Jesus is saying, "Money won't help you if you keep it under your bed. So go out and make more money." What do we say, "Gain all you can, save all you can, give all you can"? According to this reading, the parable tells us that we are fabulously gifted and we should find ways to make more, well, more money!

The problem with both these points is that Christianity is not fundamentally about the way the world is, and it is not fundamentally about a moral code. Rather, fundamentally, Christianity is about God and the very nature of God. In other words, if you and I are to live with God forever, then we are going to need to be ready to face God, now and on judgement day and that means coming to terms with God's judgment.

That is what this parable and the other two parables in Matthew 25 – the ten bridesmaids and the sheep and the goats – are all about: Jesus is preparing us to face God's judgement. It is why it is important to see the context in which Jesus is teaching, and to remember that, ultimately, the parables in the New Testament are not about us, but about God, that is, they are about Jesus himself.

## **Four Scene Parable**

To understand this parable, then, we can break it down into four scenes, or four acts. Scene 1 is about the master before he leaves on his journey. Scene 2 is what happens while the master is away. Scene 3 is what happens when the master returns. And Scene 4 is what happens to the third servant, or slave.

But parable contains a twist, and where the parable takes a twist is about the *talents themselves*: the talents are more than just about natural abilities or wealth. Instead, the talents are about the workings of God, or the workings of the Holy

Spirit, or to put it another way, the Holy Spirit is the talent Jesus leaves us for the time until he returns.<sup>2</sup>

In other words, this parable is not telling us how to come to terms with the fact that we might be super-talented or wealthy, though we may be. Rather, it is a parable telling us that, in giving us the Holy Spirit, Jesus has left us with all the gifts we need for the time between his first coming and his second coming. It is a parable about what can take place if we don't use these gifts, for when the master leaves us with gifts and resources, like the Holy Spirit, we had better share them with others, and not hide them.

But let's look at this parable: in Scene 1, the disciples, or the servants, learn all they need to know about what the master wants. As the master, Jesus is going to go away soon; after all, he is heading for Jerusalem, but he is also entrusting his followers with everything that is his. They will have work to do while he is away. The good news that the disciples know they belong to him, and he to them.

But again, what about the talents? It is important to remember why it is not necessary to dwell too much on the significance of whether a person has five talents, or two talents, or one talent. Jesus doesn't give us as his servants any more than we can cope with; and it's not a competition. As servants of Jesus, we are not to compare ourselves to others. In addition, there is no suggestion in the passage that the servant with five talents is better than the servant with the other two talents. Even the servant with one talent has more than enough. So all are blessed.

Move to Scene 2: For some reason – and this is a mystery, one of the servants does not use his talent. That's the shock we get in Scene 2. It doesn't make sense. The first two servants seem to get a healthy return on their investments; maybe because they knew which brokers to use or what stocks were trading high. We don't know.

And yet, if we are listening to what Jesus is saying, we know that the servants who had spent a lot of time with the master appear to know what the master wants; that is, *they know what they are to do with what they have*. They know what they are to do with what they have because they have been paying attention to what the master has been teaching.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 95.

How do we know that? Because the master is Jesus, and the servants are his disciples, and this parable comes right at the very end of Jesus' ministry, by which time the disciples have seen the length and breadth and height and depth of what God has been doing in Jesus.

The way they are to use their gifts – in other words, the way they are to share in the life of the Spirit – is by doing the things Jesus did – giving to those in need, spending time with the people Jesus spent time with, breaking bread with sinners, facing the criticism of the powerful, loving the unlovable.

In Jesus, we begin to see what standards of success are and how Jesus lived by them; in fact, we know what “success” in the kingdom looks like: when you begin to receive and give Jesus' gifts, you begin to look like him; that is God's definition of success: *imitating Jesus*.

Let's move on to Scene 3, where the master returns: here, we find that imitating Jesus was just what Jesus as the master wanted. In fact, Jesus says, “You spent a lot of time with me to learn how I do business, and I gave you these gifts so you could do business the way I do business. And you have. Good job, well done.”

But then it comes to light that the third servant, who was given a talent as well – has done nothing with it, and Jesus is bewildered. What happened?

Indeed, we might imagine Jesus asking this servant a series of questions, maybe like a parent asking a child as to what had taken place after being late for dinner, with Jesus questioning the servant:

“Didn't you realize that the time we spent together was all about giving and sharing, and that the meals we had were about welcoming others into the kingdom, where we all are God's children? Were you not paying attention when I was doing these things?”

And the servant, with his head down, says, “I guess not.”

“Didn't you realize that when we were baptizing that God was cleansing you and others of all your pride, all your anger, washing away your sin and showing us the way God is redeeming the world? I tried to make this clear on several occasions. What happened?”

“I don’t know.”

“And didn’t we discuss that reading Scripture invites into discovering God’s character and nature? We spent on this, you know.”

“I just wasn’t listening.”

“Or that in prayer we can open our whole hearts to God and find that God’s whole heart is opened to us?”

“Errr... no.”

So much for the three years of seminary with Jesus!

Perhaps this is why the master – that is, Jesus – is so upset, which leads to Scene 4: with the famous “wailing and gnashing of teeth,” the disbelief on the part of the master, as Jesus continues to ponder, as if Jesus is saying, “I just don’t believe this! You spend three years with me traipsing around Palestine. You saw the way I shared food with the outcast. You saw the way I transformed people. You saw the way I fulfilled all God’s promises. You saw how I opened the way to the Father that makes eternal life possible. And then I gave you all the gifts you need to sustain your life after I’ve gone.

“But you took everything I gave you and put it in the ground, and now that I have returned, you lie and say it’s *my* fault. In fact, you have make up a story that I am a cruel master who reaps where I haven’t sown. You yourself have witnessed me sowing seed everywhere, offering “everyone” that I have met the opportunity to enter the kingdom. And now you are making up a story that’s the opposite of the truth for which I have laid down my life, and you’re using that story to justify your laziness. I’ve told you, I’ve shown you the Way of life, but you’ve shut your ears, closed your eyes, and folded your arms.” “Be gone,” says Jesus. End of Scene 4.<sup>3</sup>

### **Jesus as Generous Friend**

We have gone through this parable in detail because it is an important parable, and, like all parables, it is a parable with a twist, that is, the twist is that this parable is not fundamentally about us. It’s about Jesus, and it’s telling us that

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., cf., also Sam Wells, “Who Do You Take Me For?”, a sermon preached at Duke University Chapel on November 13, 2005; go to [www.chapel-archives.oit.duke.edu/documents/sermons/2005/051113.pdf](http://www.chapel-archives.oit.duke.edu/documents/sermons/2005/051113.pdf).

Jesus is not a harsh manipulator, who gives us mysterious talents and then lies in wait to see whether we fail to use them properly, or not.

No, it is a parable telling us that Jesus is an incredibly generous friend who goes away and gives us far more than we need to imitate him in his absence. It is a parable about seeing Jesus as the One in whom we can experience the abundance of life in the Spirit. Jesus has shown us everything he wants us to know, and he has taught us everything about what it means to be a disciple, and what he is now saying is that, as he prepares to leave us, he wants us to claim all that he has given us. He wants us to understand that we have all the gifts we need to imitate him.

Therefore, what he wants us to do is to use the gifts he has given us, like the Holy Spirit and thus succeed in the only way that matters: looking and living like him.

It is why maybe the real question we need to answer is not necessarily “What is in our wallet,” though important, but how are we are using what God has given us? What gifts do you, do we – need to employ to shape the church and the kingdom? What do you *really* need to give?

After all, we can trust what Jesus is saying; He has given us everything we need to walk in his ways until he returns. And he has shown us what he has done for us, even going to death on a cross. Jesus will never let us down.

But don't forgot the twist of the parable: To get to the root of this parable, we need to see Jesus not just as the master who gives us gifts and us as servants who do or don't use God's gifts, but we need to see the *talents themselves*. For in sending Jesus, the Father did not bury his love for us in a hole in the ground; instead, God took that love to market, to trade with it, to face the risks and dangers of relationships. The talents in the end are the Incarnation, the gift of the Holy Spirit, the resurrection – of God risking everything to be with us, and that these talents are the proof that God will be with us, forever, revealing to us and the world the very heart of God. Amen.