

A Storytelling Commentary on Matthew 25:14-30

Thomas E. Boomershine, PhD

“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, and 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;
likewise the one with two talents made two talents more.

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 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.’

This story is built on numerical verbal threads: five, two, one. “One received five talents, another two, and another one.” This pattern is repeated throughout. If you get it once, then you just repeat it: five, two, one. Everything leads up to the one-talent servant in the initial entrusting of the talents and in the settling of the accounts. The one-talent servant’s description of the master “who reaps where you didn’t sow and gathers where you didn’t scatter seed” is repeated by the master before his condemnation of the one-talent servant. This story is structured for easy internalization.

The parable of the talents is structured to lead the audience to identify with the one-talent servant as is the case with all of the parables where someone gets condemned. It is very important to tell this in a manner that makes clear that his digging a hole in the ground and hiding his master's money was a safe and virtuous thing to do. In the ancient world the one way that you could protect yourself from being sued for losing money that had been entrusted to you was to bury it in the ground. There were treasures buried all over the ancient near east because that was how people protected their money. The banks were unreliable so people buried money in the ground. This is in contrast to the modern capitalist norm that the best thing to do with money is to invest it. The servants who received the five and two talents were taking a major risk.

Estimating the worth of a talent is difficult. A current estimate is that a talent was worth more than fifteen years of a working man’s wages (*Oxford Annotated NRSV*). Assuming a denarius a day, six days a week equals around 300 a year and for fifteen years the total would be 4500-5000 denarii. A contemporary equivalent for a working man might be \$30,000 times fifteen would be \$450,000-\$500,000. Whatever the context, more than fifteen years of salary. My sense is that the value of a talent varied widely in the ancient world depending on whether it was a talent of gold or silver and where and when the talent was given. One thing is certain: it was a lot of money.

The one-talent servant’s description of his master was conventional wisdom about the rich landowners of Galilee. They were generally corrupt. The servant’s accusation is that they would steal grain from fields that they had not planted. They all reaped where they didn't sow and gathered where they didn't scatter seed. Everybody in Jesus' audiences of predominantly working men could identify with the one-talent servant’s attitude toward the rich man. My hunch is that Jesus presented the servant’s speech to the rich man with a wink and a smile: “We all know how you guys operate.” The servant’s expectation is that the master will smile and receive the money back with a pat on the servant’s back.

The master responds with a degree of violence that no one would anticipate and criticizes the one-talent servant with a degree of hostility and ferocity that is totally unexpected. This shocking reversal and the master casting him into the outer darkness makes it clear that this isn't a story about a landowner down the road from Nazareth in Galilee. No landowner in Jesus’ day would respond in this manner. This is a story about God. The parable makes it clear that the real risk is for those who would be cynical and have no confidence in God. Thinking back over the parable after Jesus finished telling it, the

audience is invited to think about their attitude toward God and the gifts that God has entrusted to them. The attitudes of the one-talent servant may be fully appropriate in relation to the landowners of Galilee but not in relation to God.

The impact of this story is dependent on the listeners' identification with the one-talent servant. This is in contrast with the way that this story is usually told. If it is told in a manner that conveys judgment on the one-talent servant when he buries the money, the impact of the story is that his mistake was his failure to invest the master's money in the stock market. The virtuous are those who are willing to take risks with money in order to make more. Rich people are then the ones who are virtuous and who should be rewarded with more money.

Nothing could be farther from the spirit of Jesus' teaching and the meaning of this parable. So be sure not to tell it in a way that conveys that the servant with one-talent was stupid or selfish. He was doing the right thing by burying the talent. That was the safest and most responsible thing to do in his situation. And his attitude toward his master was fully appropriate. This will ensure that the shock of the reversal of expectation is intact for the audience.

Jesus' comment on the story confirms with certainty that this is a parable that is designed to get his listeners to think about the kingdom of God: "For to all those who have will more be given and they will have an abundance, but from those who have not, even what they have will be taken away." You can hear this kind of rhetoric in political campaigns all of the time by the advocates of the rights of the rich.

Jesus is speaking here about the blessing of the kingdom of God but it is a reversal of conventional wisdom. Conventional wisdom was that in the kingdom of God money will be taken away from the rich and given to the poor. Jesus' statement is precisely the reverse of that conventional wisdom: "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." What does this mean?

It does **not** mean that Jesus was an advocate of supply side economics: that the rich should get richer and the poor get poorer. What then could he mean? How does this statement apply to the kingdom of God? It makes sense in relation to spiritual gifts. The spiritual gifts of love, forgiveness, faith, hope, trust, compassion and active care need to be invested and used in the service of others. And those who take the risk of investing those gifts do receive in abundance. More will be given to them. But for those who have not risked the investment of those gifts but have buried them in the ground, even the gifts they have will be lost.

This same logic may also apply to the material gifts we have received. If so, the investment that is envisioned by Jesus is an investment in the priorities of the kingdom of God, giving to those who are hungry, thirsty, sick and in prison as in the parable that follows. Those who have are those who have believed in the kingdom of God and have

trusted in it and they will have abundance. Those who have not believed in it and who have tried to hide and protect their gifts, even what they have will be taken away. Indeed they will be cast into the outer darkness of loneliness and isolation where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth in regret.

This parable invites us to think. Specifically, the parable invites its working class listeners to reflect on the tendency to assume that God is like a harsh landowner from whom we need to protect ourselves by playing it safe with the gifts we have received. If we do, the result will be loss and condemnation. The parable is designed to scare the fear of God out of us. The condemnation of the “worthless” servant is intended, therefore, to be told with a tone of judgment. This is an issuing of a sentence of expulsion and ultimate isolation.