

## **The Parable of the Talents**

*A sermon delivered at Immanuel Presbyterian Church, June 9, 2013*

I think I may be the victim of a prank. And I want to share the details with you so the same thing doesn't happen to you.

Several weeks ago, Pastor George asked me if I'd consider preaching this summer while he was on vacation. Of course I was honored that he asked and happy to oblige. The summer sermon series would be dedicated to the parables of Jesus, he told me, so I should be thinking about which parable I might like to tackle.

This news was even more exciting still. I love the parables. They may be my favorite kind of Scripture: tiny little works of fiction that pack a world of gospel truth into just a few words. Over the next few days, I started thinking about the beautiful, heartwarming parables I might like to preach: the Good Shepherd, the Prodigal Son, the Lost Sheep. It was during this time that I received an email from Pastor George, in which he made a suggestion: maybe you could preach on the parable of the talents. He had heard me say a few words about it in a recent adult ed class and thought I might like to expand on what I said there.

Sure. Why not.

It didn't take me long to realize I'd been had. Unlike the parables of the Good Shepherd or the Prodigal Son or the Lost Sheep, the parable of the talents does not end well. It concludes with "weeping and gnashing of teeth." And it is surrounded by other parables that all end equally grimly. The parables that

come before conclude with a man being cut to pieces and discarded and five foolish young women being locked out of doors in the dark of night. The one just after ends with folks being condemned to the “fire created for the devil and his angels.” No wonder the pastor wanted me to tackle this one!

But what finally convinced me that this is a prank, is when I remembered that although I spoke only briefly about this parable in our adult ed class, I made one thing very clear:

I don't much care for the parable of the talents. It troubles me on multiple levels.

Here's why.

Parables are aimed at the heart. Very often in the gospels, Jesus's enemies and disciples alike ask him questions for which they hope to receive an intellectual answer: “Who is my neighbor?” “Are you now going to restore the kingdom to Israel?” Sometimes Jesus gives a straight answer. More often, though, Jesus responds to this sort of question by telling a story, a parable.

To the question, “Who is my neighbor?” Jesus answered, “*A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he was attacked by robbers.*”

To the question, “By what authority are you doing these things?” Jesus answered, “*What do you think? There was a man who had two sons.*”

In other words, when someone posed a question to Jesus that was aimed at the head—a question designed to elicit abstract, intellectual information—Jesus very often redirected the conversation to aim the issue at the heart. He didn't only want people to *know* the answer to their questions. He wanted them to *feel* and *live* the answer to their questions. And his means of making that happen was by teaching in parables.

Parables force the listener to participate in the story. When Jesus says, for example, “There was a man who had two sons,” he wants his listeners to enter the story. He wants them to identify with one son or the other. And the people of Jesus's time knew this. The story of King David and Nathan the prophet illustrates the way Israelites expected parables to work. The story is recorded in 2 Samuel, and it goes like this: Israel's greatest king, David, committed adultery with a woman named Bathsheba and then had her husband murdered. And as far as David was concerned, he'd gotten away with both offenses. The prophet Nathan came to him one day and told him a story. “There were two men in a certain town,” Nathan said, “one rich and the other poor.” This is the classic parable formula: it introduces a couple of characters with no names and only sparse detail. Nathan goes on to say that the rich man had lots of livestock and the poor man had only one animal, a sheep that he treasured “like a daughter.” Well, one day the rich man had a surprise visitor, and instead of slaughtering one of his many livestock for the evening meal, he took the single beloved sheep from the poor man. Listen to how David responded. The Bible says “David burned with anger against the man.” He was so invested in the story that it outraged him. “As surely as the Lord lives,” David screamed, “the man who did this must die!”

At this point of course, Nathan had David right where God wanted him: “You are the man!” Nathan replied. That heinous, unrighteous, and ungrateful rich man is *you*.

The parable achieved its goal: “Then David said to Nathan, ‘I have sinned against the Lord!’”

This is the power of a parable.

And this is why the parable of the talents troubles me so. Just like I’m supposed to, I always associate with one of the characters in the story. The problem is, I always associate with the wrong one. There are three servants in the tale, and two of them are identified by the end as “good and faithful.” But no matter how I try, I always see myself in the one the master calls “wicked and lazy.” He seems insecure and afraid of failure. And I resonate with that. I cringe at the idea that someone like him, someone like *me*, would end up out in the “darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

But there’s a bigger problem. On the surface, it sure looks like this parable teaches that we are saved, that we earn God’s favor, by works not by grace. Think about it: three servants are given a task and the ones who excel in that task are rewarded. The one who fails is punished. If this is a picture of how God decides who’s in and who’s out, it is a frightening picture indeed.

Raise your hand if you are troubled now, too. Good. At least we’re all on the same page.

If it’s any consolation, Jesus’s disciples were troubled too. In Matthew 21-23, Jesus condemns the religious leaders of the Israelites for totally missing the point of his ministry and failing to understand the nature of his kingdom. He really lays into them: “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites!”

But in Matthew 24, he pulls the disciples aside and speaks to them confidentially. The disciples ask him, “Tell us, what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?” As he often did, Jesus didn’t answer their question directly. He told them a series of parables, and he told them only to his disciples. The parables of the wise and foolish servants, the ten virgins, this parable, and the parable of the sheep and the goats, are all directed exclusively to Jesus’s most intimate followers. That means the people in each parable who receive judgment, who are locked out in the darkness, who weep and gnash their teeth, are not the enemies of Jesus but are among his disciples.

The content of the parables is specific to his disciples, too. All the parables in Matthew 24 and 25 are about how to be faithful during the in-between time: the time between when Jesus ascends to heaven to sit at the right hand of God the Father Almighty and the time when he will come again to judge the living and the dead. The disciples want to know when all this will happen. Jesus tells them, “About that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.” In other words, Don’t worry about when. Worry about how to conduct yourselves in the meantime. Worry about how to wait well and serve faithfully.

Bear that in mind as we turn to the parable of the talents.

### **The Master of the House**

Verse 14 says that the coming of the Kingdom “will be like a man going on a journey.” Before he goes, he does something remarkable. He entrusts his wealth to his servants. It is implied in the Greek language that the master leaves to his servants *all* his worldly assets. Everything on the planet that he usually manages himself, he puts in the care of his trusted servants. The fact that he does this indicates that these are not lowly servants like dishwashers or groundskeepers. These are servants who know the master’s

business—how to keep the books, manage the estate, enter into contracts, collect debts, and invest the master’s money. He leaves everything in their very capable hands.

Jesus implies that the master considers some of the servants more capable than others. “To one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, *to each according to his ability.*” This is an eminently practical thing to do. Because the master himself would not be around to pursue his own interests—multiplying his wealth—he needs someone to do that for him. He needs someone to do with his assets what he would be doing with them if he were there to manage them. He’d be maximizing their potential for profit. And that’s precisely what he wants his servants to do. So instead of simply divvying up the finances equally, he puts the more savvy servants in charge of a greater share.

If you’re thinking ahead to how this parable applies to us today, you might be hung up at this point. I usually am. If the master represents Jesus, and we’ll see that he does, then there’s something troubling about the idea that he entrusts more of his work to some people than to others. It’s important to keep in mind, though, that a single talent was no small sum. Scholars figure this up differently, but the short and long of it is that a talent was roughly equal to a lifetime’s wages. In today’s currency, it would be worth around a million dollars. In other words, all three amounts—five talents, two talents, one talent—are unthinkable sums of money. Imagine if your boss called you into her office and said, “I’m leaving town, and I don’t know when I’ll be back. While I’m gone, I won’t have contact with my realtor or my investor. So here’s a million dollars worth of my personal assets. Do with it what I would do with it.” What an enormous responsibility! How would you respond?

## **The Servants**

Well, in the parable, there are two responses. The first two servants go out and invest their enormous sums—five million dollars and two million dollars respectively. Note their attitude about the process. Verse 15 says that the one who received the five talents “went at once and traded with them.” He didn’t hesitate; he acted. It is implied the second servant followed a similar course of action. Their confidence pays off. They both multiply their investments one hundred percent. They must be pretty pleased with themselves. They’ve done with the assets exactly what the master would have done with them if he’d been there himself.

The third servant takes a different approach. He leaves the master’s office with a duffle bag bulging with a million dollars worth of cash. Jesus doesn’t explain the servant’s motives. But I resonate with this guy, so I feel comfortable suggesting he did what I’d do. He steps outside and asks himself, *What is the worst possible outcome in this scenario? Surely the worst thing that can happen is that, when all is said and done, I return to my master less money than he gave me to start with.* My strategy in the stock market has been to buy high and sell low. Maybe he’d had similar experience. In any case, after considering his options he goes home, digs a whole in the backyard and buries the money. Nothing risked, nothing lost.

Does anyone else feel they might have taken this approach if they were in the same situation?

### **The Master returns**

Well, eventually the master returns home and calls his servants in to settle accounts. Remember he’s been away for some time, doing whatever it is men in his position do. He has left his servants in charge of his interests. Now he’s eager to discover what they’ve done with them.

The first two servants report their progress, and the master couldn’t be more pleased. “Well done, good and faithful servant,” he says to them both. “You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over

much.” It’s remarkable that the master says they have been faithful with “little.” A single talent was not a “little”; certainly five talents was a lot. I suppose five talents sounds like a little to a guy who now has ten. In any case, he rewards their faithfulness because they have done for him exactly what he would have done for himself: they put his money to work and made him more money. He invites them “into the joy of your master.” This probably means he invited them to eat and fellowship with him. They’ve become something more than servants. They’ve become friends and colleagues.

Things go very differently for the third servant. Immediately the third servant attacks the character of the master. “I knew you to be a hard man,” the servant explains, “reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you scattered no seed, so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground.”

This is where I differ from this third servant. Even if I believed these things to be true, I’d never say them out loud!

But besides being brash, his response reveals his true motives. He claims that he was afraid of the master and that’s why he hid the money he received. But he uses these agricultural metaphors—reaping where you did not sow and gathering where you scattered no seed—to imply that it was unfair of the master to expect to gain from the efforts of his servants. You have a habit, the servant says, of getting rich from other peoples’ hard work. Think about it: who sowed the five talents that yielded ten talents? The first servant. And who received the profit? Their master. Who scattered the two talents so they could be gathered as four talents? It was the second servant. And who received the profit? Their master. To me it appears that this third servant didn’t want to invest the money his master entrusted to him because he knew that if he did, and if the investment yielded a return, the master would get all the profit and the servant himself would get nothing. That is, the master would reap where he did not sow.

So the servant presents the original single talent to his master and says, “Here you have what is yours.”

The master interprets the servant’s behavior as an act of willful rebellion, not fear. If you were afraid, he says, “then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and at my coming I should have received what was my own with interest.” Listen closely: the master is reminding the servant whose money we’re talking about—he calls it “**my** money” and “what was **my own**.” Whether he invested it himself or allowed a servant to do it, the master implies, it’s all mine. Scholars seem to agree that investing the money with bankers would have been a safe investment. The servant would no doubt have known this. He wasn’t ignorant or even afraid; he was disobedient. He willfully refused to make a profit for his master. He put his own interests before the interests of his master. That’s why the master calls this servant “wicked and lazy.”

The master didn’t take this slight lightly. He ordered his guards to take the talent away from the “worthless servant” and give it to the servant who has ten. Then he cast the “worthless servant” into the outer darkness where “there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

### **Application**

I have to say, I’m feeling less and less kinship with this third servant. It turns out he’s kind of a jerk. So what does this parable mean for us?

The master in the story surely represents Jesus. It won’t be long now in the story before Jesus is crucified, raised from the dead, and ascends to heaven. Before Jesus ascends, he leaves the disciples with a charge: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me,” he tells them. “Go therefore

and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.” Unlike the master in the parable, Jesus promises them, “I am with you always, to the end of the age.” Even so, he does leave them physically and begins a long journey to the right hand of the father.

Jesus is like the master in the story in this way: he leaves his servants in charge of everything on earth that was in his possession. He leaves them in charge of his kingdom on earth, and in charge of his church, and with the responsibility of expanding that kingdom and that church by making disciples of all nations. He entrusts to his disciples all his spiritual assets and says, “Do with these what I have been doing with them. Sow the gospel, reach the nations, and prepare for me a harvest.”

And according to Jesus, our master, there are two ways we might respond to these responsibilities. Like the first two servants, we might go immediately out into the field and start sowing the gospel, carrying on the ministry of Christ where we live and work. If we do, when Jesus returns he will call us “good and faithful servants.” Not because we are successful but because we try.

Or we might be like the third servant, who instead of pursuing the interests of his master decided instead to pursue his own interests. Remember Jesus is speaking to his closest disciples, so try and picture him surrounded by the Twelve. Among them, Judas is a great example of a servant who decided that instead of doing what his master told him, he was going to take matters into his own hands.

It’s tempting to think Judas sets the bar pretty low. As long as we do not betray Christ outright, we’ll be fine, right? Well, maybe not. Because there is one more disciple who constantly had to be reminded that being a faithful servant means doing things Jesus’ way. Peter rebuked Jesus for prophesying his

crucifixion. “Far be it from you, Lord!” he said. “This shall never happen to you.” To this Jesus responded, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.” Peter reminded Jesus once of the great sacrifice he had made to follow Jesus, and he wanted to know what was in it for him: “We have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?” And worst of all, Peter denied Jesus three times on the night Jesus was crucified. Peter was not so unlike Judas.

And, frankly, neither are we. We all have our own agendas, our expectations of how God might bless us, what’s in it for us if we fight the good fight until the end. We are all tempted at times to put our own interests ahead of the interests of our Master, whether because we are selfish or afraid or insecure. Whatever our motive, when we elevate our own interests—whether wealth or politics or influence or family—over the interests of the Master, we are the “wicked and lazy servant.”

That’s harsh, man. I know.

That’s why it’s really important that we remember this: this parable begins and ends with grace. The master entrusts all his assets to his servants. This is not an honor that they deserve. It is a gift, a gracious gesture of his confidence in them. The “good and faithful” servants are those who recognize that the talents themselves and every penny they yield in profit are property of the master. The “wicked and lazy” servant loses sight of the extraordinary opportunity the master has presented him with by entrusting him with more money than he could earn in a lifetime. Instead of reveling in the good gift of his master, he believes that he deserves a cut, that his interests aren’t being fairly represented. So the story begins with grace—with the extravagant bestowal of huge sums of money.

And the story ends with grace. Really all the master owes his servants is a pat on the head, that famous praise: “well done, good and faithful servant.” They have done what they were expected to do. They don’t deserve to be rewarded. They have simply done their job. But the master lavishes a gracious reward on them. He invites them to “share in your master’s joy,” to feast at his table, to rub elbows with his cronies, to join him as friends. The wicked and lazy servant gets just what he deserves, too. He has failed to fulfill his duty as a servant.

In other words, the servants are not rewarded for their productivity. They are not saved by works. Instead, the servants who are rewarded are those who recognize that they are the undeserving recipients of their master’s extravagant generosity. And emboldened by his generosity, they rush into the world to do his will with joy and confidence.

Forget for just a minute that the Greek word *talent* sounds just like our English word “talent,” which means “abilities” or “aptitude.” This parable really isn’t about whether we are effectively leveraging our gifts and abilities for Jesus’ sake. There’s plenty about that in the Bible, but not here. Here the Master gives every servant the same gift: knowledge of the good news that Jesus Christ is Lord. The parable is about being faithful with that knowledge. That is, it is not a matter of aptitude but of attitude.

Maybe we should leave it at that.

The great thing about being a guest preacher during a series is that I know this isn’t the last time we’ll hear about being faithful to our call to invest in Christ’s kingdom. In the coming weeks I trust that that prankster, Pastor George, will elaborate on what it looks like to invest faithfully where we live and work.

But one last word before I go. We are called to labor faithfully, but we do not labor alone. Our Master, Jesus, who promises to be with us always, empowers us for his mission by the Holy Spirit. So we don't need to fret about failure or worry about our weakness. For it not by might, nor by power—not by our cleverness or giftedness or ability—says the Lord, but by His Spirit that his great work is accomplished.

Amen