

The Talents

Matthew 25:14-30

With Study Questions

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For *the kingdom of heaven* is like a man traveling to a far country, *who* called his own servants and delivered his goods to them. ¹⁵ And to one he gave five talents, to another two, and to another one, to each according to his own ability; and immediately he went on a journey. ¹⁶ Then he who had received the five talents went and traded with them, and made another five talents. ¹⁷ And likewise he who *had received* two gained two more also. ¹⁸ But he who had received one went and dug in the ground, and hid his lord's money. ¹⁹ After a long time the lord of those servants came and settled accounts with them. ²⁰ "So he who had received five talents came and brought five other talents, saying, 'Lord, you delivered to me five talents; look, I have gained five more talents besides them.' ²¹ His lord said to him, 'Well *done*, good and faithful servant; you were faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord.' ²² He also who had received two talents came and said, 'Lord, you delivered to me two talents; look, I have gained two more talents besides them.' ²³ His lord said to him, 'Well *done*, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord.' ²⁴ "Then he who had received the one talent came and said, 'Lord, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you have not sown, and gathering where you have not scattered seed. ²⁵ And I was afraid, and went and hid your talent in the ground. Look, *there* you have *what is yours*.' ²⁶ "But his lord answered and said to him, 'You wicked and lazy servant, you knew that I reap where I have not sown, and gather where I have not scattered seed. ²⁷ So you ought to have deposited my money with the bankers, and at my coming I would have received back my own with interest. ²⁸ So take the talent from him, and give *it* to him who has ten talents. ²⁹ 'For to everyone who has, more will be given, and he will have abundance; but from him who does not have, even what he has will be taken away. ³⁰ And cast the unprofitable servant into the outer darkness. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth' (Matthew 25:14-30).

Introduction

Jesus gives a parable which includes four men. One man, the owner of the goods, is going to a far country and gives the other three (who are slaves/servants) a bunch of money (silver, [verse 18 *argyrion*] – one talent reckoned to be about 60 to 80 pounds or 6,000 days [16 years] wages). The owner expects the slaves to use the money wisely.

Two of the three men were industrious with the money entrusted to them, doubled it, received a commendation from the “lord” and were entrusted with even more. The third man buried his one talent in the ground and explained about how he was afraid because of how “hard (austere)” of a man the master was. As a result, the one talent he had was taken from him and given to the man who had ten, and he was taken and cast into the outer darkness.

So what is going on here? Is God some sort of cosmic Donald Trump? You don’t bring home the goods and “You’re fired!” I certainly hope not. The one serious capitalistic venture I ever organized almost started a new depression. And even as far as ministerial efforts – you hear of fire-charged pastors taking churches from 100 to 5000 in three years. I’ve taken our church from 160 to 300 in 21 short years.

For *the kingdom of heaven* is like a man traveling to a far country, *who* called his own servants and delivered his goods to them.¹⁵ And to one he gave five talents, to another two, and to another one, to each according to his own ability; and immediately he went on a journey.¹⁶ Then he who had received the five talents went and traded with them, and made another five talents.¹⁷ And likewise he who *had received* two gained two more also.¹⁸ But he who had received one went and dug in the ground, and hid his lord’s money (Matthew 25:14-18).

The Ever-Present God who Owns Everything

God never goes on a journey. He is everywhere, all the time (Psalm 139:1-13). So when Jesus talks about God going on a journey, He is accommodating our perception of things. There are times when it seems like God is inactive: “**Why do You stand afar off, O Lord? Why do You hide in times of trouble**” (Psalm 10:1)? This parable is addressing what

takes place during this type of period...which, frankly, is the norm for history.

One point that should strike us early in this parable is who owns everything. **"The man"**, who we understand to be God, owns the **"goods"** and even the **"slaves/servants"** (*doulous*) are said to belong to the **"Master"** (verse 24). God is the rightful owner of everything, **"The earth is the Lord's, and all its fullness, The world and those who dwell therein"** (Psalm 24:1).

But we should also add that the word **"servant"** carries the idea of a willing slave of God (Romans 1:1) against the idea of being a slave of sin (Romans 6:19). So these three men are not merely to be thought of as God's creatures, they are (at least outwardly) God's servants.

Again, as in many parables, the people in question are not to be thought of as pagans or outsiders but people within the covenant, people who are church members, professing believers who would have ostensibly believe they themselves had been purchased by the blood of Christ. As Paul writes, **"For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God's"** (1 Corinthians 6:20).

Talents

What are these talents and what did these three men actually do, or not do, with them? Again, a talent (in this case) was about 60 to 80 pounds of silver (so ten talents would have been 160 years of wages). We're talking about large amounts. It would, at very least, give the impression of great value. Given the context here I would say the talents are ministerial gifts and the activity, or inactivity, is the active and proper utilization of the gifts given. As Paul wrote elsewhere:

Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, let us prophesy in proportion to our faith;⁷ or ministry, let us use it in our ministering; he who teaches, in teaching;⁸ he who exhorts, in exhortation; he who gives, with liberality; he who leads, with diligence; he who shows mercy, with cheerfulness (Romans 12:6-8).

Two Faithful, One Wicked and Lazy

Jesus tells us two of the men “traded” (*erasato* worked, labored) and doubled-up on their efforts. But the third man went off, dug a hole and buried his Lord’s silver in the ground. When God entrusts His possessions to us, He does not approve of us burying them where they have no redeeming value.

You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden. ¹⁵ Nor do they light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a lampstand, and it gives light to all *who are in the house*.¹⁶ Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven (Matthew 5:14-16).

If God has opened our eyes and hearts to His love and grace, we have been given a great responsibility to handle this wisely and faithfully.

Let a man so consider us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. ² Moreover it is required in stewards that one be found faithful (1 Corinthians 4:1, 2).

Two of the men in this parable were faithful, the third was not.

After a long time the lord of those servants came and settled accounts with them. ²⁰ “So he who had received five talents came and brought five other talents, saying, ‘Lord, you delivered to me five talents; look, I have gained five more talents besides them.’ ²¹ His lord said to him, ‘Well *done*, good and faithful servant; you were faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord.’ ²² He also who had received two talents came and said, ‘Lord, you delivered to me two talents; look, I have gained two more talents besides them.’ ²³ His lord said to him, ‘Well *done*, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord’ (Matthew 25:19-23).

Settling Accounts

The Bible talks about how the wicked view God's apparent (but not actual) absence:

He has said in his heart, "God has forgotten; He hides His face; He will never see...¹³ Why do the wicked renounce God? He has said in his heart, "You will not require *an account*" (Psalm 10:11, 13).

Never mistake God's patience for God's absence (2 Peter 3:9).

Because the sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil (Ecclesiastes 8:11).

But there comes a time to settle accounts. Above we see two happy encounters. He who had five talents, and he who had two, were both faithful in small things (even though they weren't that small by many standards) and were then made ruler over many things and beckoned to enter into the "joy" of their lord. The words of commendation by God were the same for both. The one who had five did not impress God more than the one who had two.

A little note of caution here: We should not read this parable in such a way as to think these faithful workers earned the joy of the Lord by virtue of their industrious labor. There is no merit man can achieve before God – we cannot ever make God our debtor (Romans 4:4). Their faithful execution of ministry did not earn them the favor of God.

On the other hand, those who believe true faithfulness is devoid of human behavior, have a skewed understanding of what saving faith looks like.

But someone will say, "You have faith, and I have works." Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works (James 2:18).

We ought to also keep in mind that their success in ministry, though demonstrated in the parable by increase, is not always to be viewed as outwardly measurable.

So shall My word be that goes forth from My mouth; It shall not return to Me void, But it shall accomplish what I please, And it shall prosper *in the thing* for which I sent it (Isaiah 55:11).

I have sworn by Myself; The word has gone out of My mouth *in righteousness*, And shall not return, That to Me every knee shall bow, Every tongue shall take an oath (Isaiah 45:23).

That which is actually accomplished is up to God. The faithful steward is the one who perseveres in doing and proclaiming God's word and work.

Then he who had received the one talent came and said, 'Lord, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you have not sown, and gathering where you have not scattered seed. ²⁵ And I was afraid, and went and hid your talent in the ground. Look, *there* you have *what is yours*.' ²⁶ "But his lord answered and said to him, 'You wicked and lazy servant, you knew that I reap where I have not sown, and gather where I have not scattered seed. ²⁷ So you ought to have deposited my money with the bankers, and at my coming I would have received back my own with interest. ²⁸ So take the talent from him, and give *it* to him who has ten talents. ²⁹ 'For to everyone who has, more will be given, and he will have abundance; but from him who does not have, even what he has will be taken away. ³⁰ And cast the unprofitable servant into the outer darkness. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth' (Matthew 25:24-30).

The Lame Excuse

Now the unproductive servant gives his lame excuse. It was because of God's character flaws. God is austere and goes into people's fields and just takes whatever He wants. Casting aspersions toward God is something people have grown very comfortable with in our current

culture. A contemporary best-selling atheistic author has this to say about God:

The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully.¹

The man in the parable buried his talent in the ground rather than utilize it to honor his Master, redeem his fellow man and render unto God what is rightfully His. Then he sought to justify his wicked lethargy on the basis of God's austere personality. On the day of reckoning he tells God "Here, you can have what's yours" implying that there are things which aren't God's. It's like my kids telling me and my wife what belongs to them and what belongs to us. When they get a little too big for their britches, we remind them that it all belongs to us.

This isn't merely someone who lacks spiritual industriousness. This is someone who has no regard for the things of God, buries them in the ground and then prepares to blame God for the failure. Blaming God is in vogue but God doesn't buy it.

God answers by appealing to the fictional God this wicked and lazy servant created to justify his faithlessness. When God says, "you knew" I was that kind of austere God so you should have at least put the money in the bank, He was not agreeing. Luke's account of a similar parable explains:

And he said to him, 'Out of your own mouth I will judge you, *you* wicked servant. You knew that I was an austere man, collecting what I did not deposit and reaping what I did not sow (Luke 19:22).

¹ <http://www.richarddawkins.net/article,2491,Ben-Stein-Vs-Sputtering-Atheists,Brent-Bozell-III-Yahoo-News>

In other words, if that's the God you want – if that's the standard you've created – you'll get it. Here's a big tip: there is no God you can create who is as good, loving and gracious as the true God of the Scriptures.

The man in this parable was not merely a man who couldn't produce. He was a man who had no regard for the grace of God, the means by which God brings forth His grace and had created His own false god who he thought he could serve through inactivity. In light of this, his condemnation, which was very severe, was also very just.

Questions for Study

1. Give a brief synopsis of what happens in this parable (page 3).
2. Does God ever go on a journey? Explain (pages 3, 4).
3. What does God own? What does it mean to be a “servant” of God (page 4)?
4. What were “talents” (page 4)?
5. What are we to do with those things with which God entrusts us (page 5)?
6. What does it mean when God settles accounts (page 6)?
7. Why do people think there will be no settling of accounts (page 6)?
8. How do we exercise faithful stewardship (page 7)?
9. Discuss the excuse of the wicked and lazy servant and how God responded (pages 7-9).