

Sermon: High Risk, Great Reward

New North Church, Hingham

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Based on **1 Thessalonians 5:1-11, Matthew 25:14-30**

Today's parable is the second of three so-called Judgement Parables told by Jesus in Jerusalem just before the Passover and his eventual arrest and trial. The first parable, heard last week, was about watchfulness and being ready for the Second Coming. Next week's parable describes the criteria for final judgement, which then leads us into the Advent season.

On the surface, this parable is about the responsibility to serve while we wait for that promised Second Coming. If you're like me and you tend to go looking for trouble, you'll find it here. At the very least, we should 'open with caution.'

There is a lot we can say about 'talents' in Matthew's Gospel. Originally, a *talent* was a measure of weight and eventually evolved to mean a fixed amount of gold or silver, and it became the largest unit of currency in Matthew's time. Roughly speaking, one *talent* equaled 6,000 denarii or 6,000 days' wages. In 1611, King James' Bible translators put a monetary value on it: 187£, 10s.

Luke (19:11-27) also tells a version of this story, but in his version, the master gives a smaller amount of money to ten servants. Matthew vastly inflates the sums given to only three servants, and I'm sure he had his reasons.

One more thing about the money: according to first-century law, burying money to protect it from theft was perfectly acceptable. And if you buried your money as soon as you got it, you were absolved of liability if it were subsequently stolen.

In the Gospel's social setting, all this is important because it affects how we hear the parable. In Jesus' time, wealth was concentrated at the top of the social pyramid. How the few accumulated that wealth was a source of friction, because wealth at the top came from those at the bottom, in terms of taxes, fees, and interest, or usury. Also remember that Jesus always builds the social setting into his parables and then flips the situation on its head, and that he's almost always talking to a crowd of exploited people.

We can interpret this parable in at least two ways. In one scenario, we can think of talents as a possession, specifically the master's possession, and he can do with them what he wants, which he does by parceling out his wealth to three servants, who in this scenario act as retainers.

The people who first heard this story might have heard Jesus describe a familiar situation: imagine someone doubling their money – a lot of money – without doing anything specific to earn it. Since honorable people did not engage in usury, the master lets his retainers do it in his absence, and their interest rates were high.

Told this way, this is a story about one class of people stealing from another. Except the third servant, who did act honorably. He sees the master for who he is and refuses to take part in this *nefarious* scheme. And what is his reward for neither losing nor increasing his master's talent? He's thrown into the outer darkness.

How is this good news for anyone, especially for the poor and oppressed? The story doesn't give us anything we can use. It doesn't leave us in a better place. All it really does is make us wonder why the master was so mean to the third servant when all he did was protect the master's wealth, legally.

A few weeks ago, we heard how the unprepared wedding guest ended up thrown into the outer darkness (Matthew 22:1-14). Matthew uses the phrase three times, this being the third. Once we know that, and hear Jesus say it again, maybe we have to think that Jesus has something else in mind by telling this parable.

In a second interpretation, maybe we can think of the talents as a gift from God. As something is expected from everyone, and more is expected from some than from others, maybe the man's wealth is a metaphor for God's will. Maybe by handing out portions of this kind of wealth, Jesus empowers and perhaps commands his disciples and his followers alike to integrate his words and actions into all aspects of their own lives, and ours. The master never tells the servants what to do with their portion, but he does seem to assume that they know what is expected of them.

Two of the servants understand that, and they go off to do what they can while the third seems stuck in his thinking, failing to understand how the master has empowered him. His punishment is based on a future accounting of his present responsibilities. God's grace is not to be hoarded or hidden, but multiplied and shared through service.

Jesus' parables always call us to decide. They're not told for their entertainment value; they're meant to get us to decide whether we are for or against Jesus and the Kingdom of God; whether we choose repentance and faith or not. 'Let those who have ears to hear, listen.'

Our first scenario might make total sense to anyone living in poverty or oppression. According to globalissues.org,¹ almost half the world — over three billion people — lives on less than \$2.50 a day. Around here, that will buy you a cup of coffee. On a world-wide basis, about every other child — one in two — lives in poverty. For the nearly two billion children living in the developing world, their main issues involve having adequate shelter, access to clean, fresh water, and access to health services. In terms of lessening poverty, progress is slowest in Southern Asia and sub-Saharan Africa.

The causes of poverty are global too: national debt, lack of educational opportunities, politics, and policy. Also, trade, agriculture, and economic issues aggravate the problem from one country to the next, and governmental corruption is high on the list of common causes. Global Issues says, 'To attract investment, poor countries enter a spiraling race to the bottom to see who can provide lower standards, reduced wages and cheaper resources.' And, finally, tax avoidance by the wealthy in any and all countries tends to push the tax burden toward the middle class and below.

You can see how the poor and oppressed in any era might read today's parable as an affirmation that the game is rigged toward the wealthy, and that the poor will always end up in the outer darkness, unable to gain a foothold to raise themselves up.

But if we approach the parable from God's point of view, and see the talents as a gift of God's grace, then all is not lost.

The World Bank² recently released a study which described several pathways to increase economic mobility from generation to generation, including investments in early childhood development, education access, and other key services that are critical to improving mobility.

Investments in learning and better-quality education are an obvious pathway out of poverty, and the World Bank also announced an accelerated effort to help countries invest more, and more effectively, in their people as 'a critical step to boosting inclusive economic growth and ending extreme poverty.'

The World Bank study notes that ‘when people perceive that they cannot move out of poverty, they are less likely to take the necessary steps to do so - their perceptions impede their aspirations, keeping them trapped.’ That also seems obvious.

It’s equally clear that the environment a person is born into matters. Poorer people are more likely to live in areas with worse schools, crumbling infrastructure, low access to services, higher crime, and so on.

According to the World Bank, we’re making progress toward ending *extreme* poverty by 2030 by focusing on ‘sustainable and inclusive’ economic growth and by investing in people. We can get there, but maybe not just by spending money or devising new policies.

Jesus knows ours is a faith in progress. Proclaiming the good news might by itself bring people to faith, but his focus and his goal is on our embodying a new way of life. No person, and no church, is an island. What happens to the people in Puerto Rico, or Venezuela, or Zimbabwe, or anywhere, matters to us here. Christian social involvement through mission and outreach must be concerned with the welfare of all people, their situations, and communities, if we are to live for the good of our neighbor and in the love of God.

Therefore, as the apostle Paul said, encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.

Amen.

¹ <http://www.globalissues.org/article/26/poverty-facts-and-stats>, accessed 16 November 2017.

² www.worldbank.org/poverty World Development Report on Education:
<http://www.worldbank.org/en/publication/wdr2018>, accessed 18 November 2017.