

Broomfield



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The Parable of the Talents

Watching not Waiting¹

Years ago in a city near Edinburgh, a large fishing fleet embarked upon its yearly expedition to the Newfoundland banks. At the end of three months, many in the town gathered to greet their returning loved one at the dock. As the fleet approached the shore, the captain stood on the deck of one of the ships with his field glasses and reported to the sailors who had come out to greet them. The captain began to recite whom he saw. “Jock, I see your mother and two brothers...” “And William, there is your Freda...” “And Thomas, there's your father and uncle...” And on and on he went.

Soon the sailors on board had received word that their families were there and all looked fine — all the sailors except for one, Angus. The Captain couldn't locate his family. And so when the ship docked, Angus, fearing the worst searched the crowd and then the town. And when he couldn't find his family, he quickly headed for home. When he came to his house and opened the door his family greeted him saying, “Oh, Angus, we've been waiting for you.” Angus, relieved that they all were well, replied, “The families of the other men were watching for them.”

In the age in which we live so many of us are waiting for the Lord, but so few of us are watching. That is perhaps why Christ told the parable of the talents. It is not enough to know that Christ is returning. The biblical mandate is that Christ's Second Coming must affect the way we live today. The Second Coming of Christ must lead us to a watchful disposition.

The Stewardship

Notice the text of Matthew 25:14-30.

In examining this parable, let's begin by looking at The Stewardship herein described.

Matthew 25:14, “For the kingdom of heaven is as a man travelling into a far country, who called his own servants, and delivered unto them his goods.”

To further explain the nature of the Kingdom of God, Christ tells a parable about a man who obviously was going on an extended journey. Because of the expected length, he no doubt felt the need to entrust

¹ This illustration is taken from Let Me Illustrate, Dr. Donald Grey Barnhouse, pages 284-285

three of his servants with his possessions. The servants of this parable are what we would term, slaves². The word used here is indicative of the lowliest of all slaves to the most skilled craftsmen and artists. The common denominator here is that the servant was one who was owned by another. This is an important distinction. When we think of slavery we tend to think of the stereotypical institution found in the United States in the nineteenth century where the slaves were ignorant, black and cruelly mistreated.³ Yet, the slavery of the ancient world was quite different. It was not unheard of that you could own a slave who was better educated than you. As such, it was not uncommon for a slave to be entrusted with full power and authority over the owner's property- much like a power of attorney today.⁴

Matthew 25:15, “And unto one he gave five talents, to another two, and to another one; to every man according to his several ability; and straightway took his journey.”

There are two phrases that are significant here. The first phrase is this: He gave . . . talents. In this context, the talent obviously references money. However, the word itself simply denoted a measurement of weight. For example, in Revelation 16:21 we read this:

Revelation 16:21, “And there fell upon men a great hail out of heaven, every stone about the weight of a talent⁵: and men blasphemed God because of the plague of the hail; for the plague thereof was exceeding great.”

In light of this, it is impossible to know exactly what each of these slaves received. However this we do know, what they received was quite substantial. For example, an Attic talent amounted to six thousand denars.⁶ According to this rate of exchange, it would take an ordinary laborer in Palestine sixteen and one-half years to earn one Attic talent.⁷ These servants received a large amount of money! And yet, the focus here is not on the amount that they received, but on the fact that what they received was according to their ability.

Each servant received that which he was capable of using for the advancement of his master's household. This is an important thing to understand in this parable. The ministries, abilities, and capabilities of each individual vary greatly in the body of Christ. Each of us has been given the ministry and tools as God has willed. And thus, our call in the kingdom is not equal giving, service, or fruit, but equal sacrifice. Truly, the call of the kingdom of God is not great results, but faithfulness with what we have!

Faithfully exercises

Matthew 25:16-17, “Then he that had received the five talents went and traded with the same, and made them other five talents. And likewise he that had received two, he also gained other two.”

² Doulos {doo'-los), a slave, bondman, man of servile condition.

³ The slavery in the United States nineteenth century certainly had many of the stereotypical abuses, yet many of the slaves were well treated and were quite well educated. In fact the first slaves in North America were not black, but Scottish men.

⁴ For an Old Testament example of this type of slave, compare Joseph in Potiphar's house.

⁵ Literally one talent each.

⁶ Recall that denarii were equivalent to one days wage. Compare Matthew 20:1-7

⁷ The New International Version's marginal note equates one talent to one thousand dollars. This is based upon \$20.00 per ounce gold. An the assumption that 50 troy ounces equals about 1 talent. However this figure is incorrect. A talent of gold would weigh approximately 200 avoirdupois pounds. Since there are approximately 14.5 troy ounces in a pound a talent would weight about 2500 troy ounces. In today's market of \$400 per ounce gold this figure would be approximately \$1,160,000.

In this passage, the word traded carries the broad connotation of doing business over a period of time. From this we conclude that the servants just didn't make one transaction and call it a day. Rather, they traded and re-traded as long as their master was away. The idea here is that the first two slaves diligently labored to increase their master's wealth. They used to their full advantage all the resources their master had given them.

Matthew 25:18, "But he that had received one went and digged in the earth, and hid his lord's money."

To understand the actions of this third servant it is important to understand the setting. Palestine had few banks (though in the Ancient Near East banking was not that uncommon). As such, the practice of hiding valuables in the ground was quite common. Because of the uncertainty of the times, most people protected their valuables by burying them in a secret spot in the ground. When they needed money or decided to sell or trade a piece of jewelry, for instance, they would go to the place at night, uncover the jar or storage box, take out what was desired, and rebury the rest. And that evidently is what this third servant decided to do. Rather than using the talent to gain for his master, the third servant decided to bury it.

The Reckoning

Matthew 25:19-23, "After a long time the lord of those servants cometh, and reckoneth with them. And so he that had received five talents came and brought other five talents, saying, Lord, thou deliveredst unto me five talents: behold, I have gained beside them five talents more. His lord said unto him, Well done, thou good and faithful servant: thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy lord. He also that had received two talents came and said, Lord, thou deliveredst unto me two talents: behold, I have gained two other talents beside them."

Notice first the reckoning of the five and two talent servants. Each of these slaves is not bragging. They simply are relating to their master that with the five and two talents received each doubled their master's wealth. They were excited. Notice the word order. "Lord, thou deliveredst unto me five talents: behold, I have gained beside them five talents more." The servants say behold⁸. This is equivalent to saying you're never going to believe this! The servants in this text are just ecstatic over what has happened. They are excited to relate to their master all the details! The focus here is upon the attitude of the servant as well as upon their achievements.

Matthew 25:23, "His lord said unto him, Well done, good and faithful servant; thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy lord."

Notice the commendation of the master. The master calls the servants good.⁹ This description of a good servant denotes that the servant not only had done well, but that the servant also had high character and moral integrity. The master also terms the servants faithful.¹⁰ Because the master refers to his servants in this manner tells us something of the slave's devotion to him. And as a result of the servants being good and faithful, the master entrusts them with more responsibility. Because his servants had proven to be of

⁸ ἰδεῖ *ide id'*-eh behold, see, the force and meaning of something which has definite meaning.

⁹ ἀγαθος *agathos*, this refers to the character of the Servant.

¹⁰ πιστος *pistos* to be faithful was to be one who was "able to be trusted."

high moral character, and because they are trustworthy, the owner rightfully gives to these slaves further and greater responsibility for service.

Now in contrast to all of this, notice the reckoning of the one talent servant.

Matthew 25:24-27, “Then he which had received the one talent came and said, Lord, I knew thee that thou art an hard man, reaping where thou hast not sown, and gathering where thou hast not strawed: And I was afraid, and went and hid thy talent in the earth: lo, there thou hast that is thine. His lord answered and said unto him, Thou wicked and slothful servant, thou knewest that I reap where I sowed not, and gather where I have not strawed: Thou oughtest therefore to have put my money to the exchangers, and then at my coming I should have received mine own with usury.”

This is a stark contrast to the first two. It is obvious that the servant has no allegiance to his master. The first two servants obviously highly valued their master. The third servant’s response is nothing less than an indictment of his master's character. The slave calls his master unmerciful and dishonest!¹¹

The master seeing the insincerity of the servant’s indictment basically says, “had you been at all serious about my character, you would have at least put my money in the bank to earn interest.”

Now, in the days of Christ Rome had a banking system that was in many respects like that of modern times. The way that the banking system works is rather fascinating. The bankers¹² displayed their money on a bench for passerby’s to see.

The banker's occupation consisted of three activities: Exchanging, charging interest, and paying interest. They exchanged Roman money for Greek, Greek for Hebrew and Hebrew for Roman. Each time the money was changed they kept a significant portion of it—generally half—for their hard work. These bankers lent money typically at twelve- percent simple interest. When one banked money with them they typically paid six percent interest.¹³ Yet, in spite of this system, the servant buried the master’s money. Then the servant indicts his master’s character rather than his own laziness as the reason for his poor performance!¹⁴

It is important to note that the master never agrees with this servant. He only says that if indeed you thought that way, why didn't you act accordingly?¹⁵ The servant did not really fear his master. Rather, the implication—which would have been understood by those listening to this parable—is that this servant was slothful. The slave just did not care about his master or his estate. His master's property and estate were the least of his concerns. Thus, the master's condemnation is not on account of the poor attainment of the slave, but on account of the slave's ungodly character.¹⁶

Matthew 25:26, “His lord answered and said unto him, Thou wicked and slothful servant, thou

¹¹ Compare verse 24 and 25 “I knew Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow and gathering where you scattered no seed. ‘And I was afraid, and went away and hid your talent in the ground. See, you have what is yours.’ (NASB)

¹² Literally the benches

¹³ The bankers of today charge similar rates of interest on their loans. Christ specifically called these men thieves in Mark 11:17, Luke 19:46, Jeremiah 7:11 and Hosea 12:7. Christ deemed this practice as really nothing more than stealing and therefore condemned it as a violation of the eighth commandment.

¹⁴ Compare also Matthew 25:26-27

¹⁵ Compare Matthew 25:26

¹⁶ Compare Matthew 25:26

knewest that I reap where I sowed not, and gather where I have not strawed:”

The master calls the servant wicked.¹⁷ To be wicked is to possess a character that not only is opposed to God, but also is destructive in its effects. Because the servant unjustly besmirched the character of his master and failed to use his master's wealth for the betterment of the household the description fits. The master also calls the servant slothful.¹⁸ To be slothful is have a disinclination for work, to be indolent and lazy. This individual sought to get by with as little work and inconvenience as possible. He viewed work as an unnecessary burden and imposition. In the Septuagint¹⁹ its noun form is used in the context of the sluggard which vividly expresses the nuance here.²⁰ Because this servant did nothing with the talent entrusted to him, but rather buried it and spent his days living in ease, the master rightly accuses him of being lazy.

Wickedness and Sloth Rewarded

Finally notice the one talent servant is rewarded according to his slothfulness and wickedness.

Matthew 25:28-30, “Take therefore the talent from him, and give it unto him which hath ten talents. For unto every one that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundance: but from him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath. And cast ye the unprofitable servant into outer darkness: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

According to wisdom, the master took the one talent of the unfruitful slave, and gave it to the one who had earned the most with his master's money. This is much like what God did with Saul and David. The kingdom was taken from Saul and given to David. Here the parable transitions from a parabolic lesson to a foretaste of the sentence that will be received at the Last Judgment. At the Last Judgment the unprofitable servants shall be cast into outer darkness.

The phrase outer darkness is a common New Testament description of hell. In outer darkness there is an absence of light. The term light refers to God’s presence and therefore we see that darkness refers to the lack of God’s presence.²¹ We also see that in outer darkness there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. This is a description of hell. Hell is a place of torment. And yet, the torment mentioned here is not one that leads to regret on the part of the sinner, but one that leads to further anger.²²

And thus we see the parable of the talents. What a sobering parable!

The Message

Yet, what is its message? The message that is being communicated in this parable is one and the same as Christ's words in Matthew 26:41, “Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation.”

Indeed, through this parable Christ calls His children to be ready for the Second Coming. He calls His

¹⁷ πονηρος poneros bad, of a bad nature or condition, in a physical sense: diseases or blind, in an ethical sense, evil, wicked and bad. The word is used in the normative case in Matthew 6:13. This usually denotes a title in the Greek. Hence Christ is saying deliver us from “The Evil” and is probably referring to Satan.

¹⁸ οκνερος okneros sluggish, slothful, backward, lazy

¹⁹ LXX

²⁰ Compare Proverbs 6:6,9; 20:4; 21:25

²¹ Compare 1 John 1:5

²² Compare also Acts 7:54 for an explanation of the colloquialism.

children to be faithful with the labor that is entrusted to them. He calls His children to be busy doing the work of His kingdom. Indeed, as the child of God living in this state of sin and misery, we must always be ready for the appearing of our Lord.

That in fact is the very exhortation that served as the basis for this parable.

Matthew 25:13, “Watch therefore, for ye know neither the day nor the hour wherein the Son of man cometh.”

And all of this raises the question: What sort of men and women ought we to be on this earth? With what ought we to busy ourselves?

The answer, based on our parable this morning, is that we ought to be busy doing the work of the Kingdom of God rather than just please ourselves.

The one talent slave is indicted NOT because he didn't earn money for his master or wasted his master's money. He is indicted because he was selfish and lazy. His time, comfort, and needs were more important. He couldn't be bothered by the work of his master. Thus, rather than spending his life using the talent entrusted to his care for the good of his master he buried his talent and, in so doing, buried himself. Simply put, he wasn't watching!

J. C. Ryle said this:

“We are not told that the unprofitable servant was a murderer, or a thief, or even a waster of his Lord's money: but he did nothing- and this was his ruin!... 'To do no harm,' says Baxter, 'is the praise of a stone, not a man.’”²³

And yet, if we were honest this morning, we would have to agree that there are times in our lives when we resemble the one talent slave more than the five or two talent slaves. Much of our lives are spent planning how we are going to spend our next free moment. From the way we spend our money to what captivates us in our culture, most of us can boast of little more than the one talent slave.

At times we are lazy, indolent, and self-centered in what we are doing. In fact, if this is an apt description of our lives, then with Paul we indeed are, “...dead even while we live...” (1 Timothy 5:6).

So what is it that can motivate us and break us of our spiritual lethargy?

While we could suggest numerous answers, this passage gives us a powerful response. The first of these comes with these words: “enter thou into the joy of thy lord” (Matthew 25:21). The second comes with this response, “well done, good and faithful servant” (Matthew 25:23).

These passages speak not only of a future reward, but also a present one. In other words it is the anticipating and participating the joy of the Lord that must motivate us. In fact it was the joy of the Lord that moved Christ and Paul.²⁴ And it is the joy of the Lord that is our strength!²⁵

²³ J. C. Ryle, Commentary on Matthew, page 245

²⁴ Compare Hebrews 12:2, and 2 Timothy 4:8

²⁵ Compare Nehemiah 8:10

The Joy of the Lord

Well then what is the “joy of the Lord”? How do we enter into this joy? How can we know it?

Notice from Scripture that it speaks of conviction.

1 Peter 1:8, “Whom having not seen[Christ], ye love; in whom, though now ye see him not, yet believing, ye rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory.”

The first thing that produces the joy of the Lord is belief in Jesus Christ alone. When this occurs, we ever and always hold the conviction that no matter how bad life may become,²⁶ it is well with our soul.

The joy of the Lord is a consequent rejoicing.

Philippians 4:4, “Rejoice in the Lord alway: and again I say, Rejoice.”

Indeed! As we gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and as we study His perfections our joy increases. For Jesus just isn't the Lord of the world, He also is our savior, advocate, and friend! Truly, when we gaze upon Christ and behold His beauty²⁷ we know the Joy of the Lord!

The joy of the Lord is communing with one another in the body of Christ.

3 John 4, “I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth.”

Family of God, to spend your life investing in other people, is to know the joy of the Lord. In fact, you want to behold a miserable Christian, find someone in the body who is living for themselves. Find someone who thinks that this body exists for them and you will find a miserable person. Find one who approaches their family, work, life as the source of blessing and again, if you can find one such as this, you are beholding someone who is living and yet dead.²⁸

Truly, there is no greater joy than knowing that God has used you to affect a person for eternity and that someone was encouraged in their walk because of you. This truly is what kingdom living is all about!

Truly, cultivate a life that reflects these three characteristics and you not only will be watching —instead of waiting but you will know, “The Joy of the Lord!”

²⁶ Compare 1 Peter 1:6

²⁷ Compare Psalm 45

²⁸ Compare 1 Timothy 5:6

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About the Preacher

Greg Thurston preached this sermon on April 3, 2005. Greg is the Preacher at Broomfield Presbyterian Church.