

Matthew 25 14-30

The Parable of the Talents

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer.

We are rapidly drawing to the end of the current church year and with it our focus on the gospel of Matthew. And in the last and this parable, Matthews focus is on offering advice on how disciple are to live their lives in the in between times until the master returns. And Matthew is quite clear on the risks of inaction

This week we have a powerful, wealthy master preparing for a long journey by entrusting his estate to his servants. In New Testament times high level slaves often acted as managers the house of the state and some asking slaves to steward would have not sounded out of place to contemporary listeners.

We learn some interesting things about the character of the master.

- first he is very **wealthy**. A talent is a unit of exchange roughly equivalent to 20 years wages, so around £600,000 in current UK value. So giving five talents is equivalent to 100 years worth of paid labour, some £3 million
- Second the master **treats different people differently**. Each of the three servants is given a different number of talents according to their perceived ability: 5,2,1
- Trust is a firm belief in the reliability truth and ability of someone or something. And clearly Master is **trusting**, of all of them.
- The master also has a **laissez faire**, leave alone management style leaving each servant to exercise their own judgement in how they manage the talent entrusted to their care. The servants are given the authority to make decisions. They are empowered
- The master leads by example **expects his servants mimic his own behaviour** and so generate more wealth
- And as we shall learn, the is hard with **high expectations** and is **judgemental**. There is no sense of it rally does not matter how you respond to the task in hand.

Time is important in this parable

- The servants do not know how long the master will be gone but they are certain he will return, when at such time they will be held accountable for their actions
- The master is going to be gone some time but will return. There is time to make things happen. But what to do in the short term. The good 5 and 2 talent servants go off **at once** and trade. These two are not victims of procrastination or indecision. They take immediate and decisive action imitating the behaviour of their master by trading. They demonstrate an urgency to fulfil their master's will

After a long absence, the master returns. And so we come to judgement.

- the five and two talent servants are found faithful and they are rewarded.
- In Luke's version there are 10 servants each given 1 pound each. Here although the first slaves and more than the second each is done exceptionally well with the talent stay have been given, doubling their masters wealth. Importantly the

servants *performs according to their perceived potential* and are faithfully double and master expected: increased his kingdom

- The reward is to be entrusted with even more authority and to be invited to **enter into the joy of their master**. Happy days

Ah but the **third servant**. He admits that he was terrified to lose his masters funds and so to minimise risk and protect himself, he buried his one talent in the ground. Although burying treasure may seem odd to us today burying treasure was quite common at this time.

There may be some listening here who would argue that the third servant actually did OK; not excellent but satisfactory. He did not steal or risk his masters funds; he preserved them

And yet the master is furious. Why? Is it because he was lazy, unwilling to do the work needed? Or is it because servant abused the trust of the master to complete his set task. Crime: he did nothing productive with his talents it.

When I was a teacher the most infuriating students were those who did not use their talents It really provoked me. A disproportionate response

This slave, paralysed by fear and too afraid to take a risk is faithless because he attempted to secure his own well-being with inaction. He failed to grasp that doing stuff and risky behaviour are part of the master's way of doing business.

And so this useless servant is cast out into outer darkness and wailing and gnashing of teeth.

And even more challenging his talent is given to the richest servant. Ouch. A challenging view of economic justice.

Am I alone in finding this and last week's parables really challenging? Last week it was the ill-prepared dippy-dippy do bridesmaids who meant well; had some but not enough oil who missed out on the banquet. This week is a risk averse, fear-debilitated servant get it too. Is this judgement not too harsh?

Let me come back to this point. For now, I believe it is important that we balance the plight of the 3rd servant with the first two

We need to also focus on the generous invitation we are given to be co-creators and to enter in the joy of our master. By co creation I mean helping to shape the world we are in.

Hard as it might be to accept but God loves us accepts us and believes in us and trust us and invite us to live out a life with courage compassion and confidence to use our God-given talents to advance his kingdom. Talents represents the goodness God has bestowed on each person. And no matter what we might think God believes in us and trust us with these incredible gifts be co-creators of a just world. We are given free licence to use the gifts as we see fit. And the good news is that as we advance the kingdom on earth we get that sense of peace and joy that comes with following the path set by the lord. We enter the joy of our master. This message can be lost if we just focus on judgment

In our weekly Ministry Team meeting we posed the question: how the Master would have responded if the two good and faithful servants had failed. For one moment,

suppose this scenario. *Master, we traded as you traded but an unexpected recession in Egypt meant our creditors can pay and we lost it all. These events were beyond our control.* Is it the out darkness and wailing and gnashing for them too?

The no guiding principles in today's parable just what the master might have said. But we can look to another powerful parable which deals with the use of god given time, wealth and talents: the parable of the prodigal son. Here a younger son demands his inheritance and leaves his father. This son does not simply bury the treasure for safekeeping but fritters away on a rock 'n' roll lifestyle.

And yet, when he realises the dreadful mistake his has made with his god given talents, he returns destitute to the father expecting harsh judgement. And yet, he is welcomed with open arms and accepted into the feast.

No one parable can capture the entirety of the Christian life. Each one gives an insight. Which parable insight are you drawn to

This week and last week, Mathew urges us to be ready with enough oil and to use our gifts and talents urgently to advance our kingdom. These last two judgment parables come across as do it or else threats. But judgment is the other side of the coin of mercy. Our God is loving kind and merciful. There is always a place at God's table for the repentant prodigal son or daughter.

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