

The Parable of the Talents is, perhaps amongst the most significant of Jesus's Kingdom parables in Matthew's gospel and is set in the context of investments. This passage is the derivation of the English word 'Talent', but the word has changed meaning somewhat. In Matthew, a rich man delegates the management of his wealth to others, much as investors in today's markets do. As we have heard, he gives five talents to the first servant, two talents to the second, and one talent to the third.

A talent was an ancient unit and the heaviest or largest biblical unit of measurement for weight and value in Greece, Rome, and the Middle East, equal to about 75 pounds or 35 kilograms. In the Old Testament, a talent was a unit of measurement for weighing precious metals, usually gold and silver, being first mentioned in the book of Exodus within the inventory of materials used for the construction of the tabernacle: "All the gold that was used for the work, in all the construction of the sanctuary, the gold from the offering, was twenty-nine talents ..." (Exodus 38:24).

In the New Testament, a talent was a value of money or coin. The Hebrew term for "talent" was כִּקְאָר (*kikkār*), meaning a round gold or silver disk, or disk-shaped loaf. In Greek the word is τάλαντον (*tálan-ton*), a large monetary measurement equal to 6,000 drachmas or denarii, the Greek and Roman silver coins. Thus, a talent represented a rather large sum of money. According to some scholars, one who possessed five talents of gold or silver was a multimillionaire by today's standards. Some calculate the talent in the parable to be equivalent to 20 years of wages for the common worker

Two of the servants earn 100 % returns by trading with the funds. (It is not explained how they achieved this, but at today's Bank of England rate of interest it would take just 140 years; there are more risky ways which would reduce the time). The third servant, though, hides the money in the ground and earns nothing. The rich man returns, rewards the two who made money, but severely punishes the servant who did nothing.

Of course, the meaning of the parable extends far beyond financial investments. God has given each person a wide variety of gifts, and he expects us to employ those gifts in his service. It is not acceptable merely to put those gifts in a cupboard and ignore them. Like the three servants, we do not have gifts of the same degree. The return God expects of us is commensurate with the gifts we have been given. The servant who received one talent was not condemned for failing to reach the five-talent goal; he was condemned because he did nothing with what he was given. The gifts we receive from God include skills, abilities,

family connections, social positions, education, experiences, and much more. The point of the parable is that we are to use whatever we have been given for God's purposes. The severe consequences to the unproductive servant, far beyond anything triggered by mere business mediocrity, tell us that we are to invest our lives, not waste them.

Yet the particular talent invested in the parable is *money*, in the order of the equivalent of a million or so pounds sterling in today's world. In modern English, this fact is obscured because the word *talent* has come to refer mainly to skills or abilities, but this parable concerns money. It depicts investing, not hoarding, as a godly thing to do if it accomplishes godly purposes in a godly manner. In the end, the master praises the two faithful servants with the words, "Well done, good and trustworthy slave". In these words, we see that the master cares about the results ("well done"), the methods ("good"), and the motivation ("trustworthy").

More pointedly for the workplace, it commends putting capital at risk in pursuit of earning a return. As a teacher, I often told my pupils that there could be no progress or achievement without risk, a leap into the unknown. We should invest our skills and abilities, but also our wealth and the resources made available to us at work, all for the affairs of God's kingdom. This includes the production of needed goods and services. The volunteer in the charity shop is fulfilling this parable. So is the entrepreneur who starts a new business and gives jobs to others, the machine operator who develops an innovative process and the television presenter who champions a rickshaw ride to raise awareness and much needed cash for others in real need.

God does not endow people with identical or necessarily equal gifts. If you do as well as you can with the gifts given to you by God, you will hear his "Well done," and so all trusty people have equal worth and praised identically. The implication of the parable is that we are to use whatever talents we've been given to the best of our ability for God's glory and when we have done that, we are on an equal playing field with other faithful, good and trustworthy servants of God.

The parable is located in Jesus' eschatological (end of the world) discourse in Matthew 24 and 25, where he instructs his disciples to endure through difficult times and to live in anticipation of the Lord's return. Like all the parables in this section, it exemplifies the certainty of the Lord's coming and how the disciples are to live in the meantime. Like the preceding two parables, the return of the master is certain but the timing is unknown. It was

becoming apparent by the time the gospels were written that the second coming of the Lord might not happen any time soon. After his long absence, he then discovers what each servant has done with his property. The first two slaves have done remarkably well with what they have been given. They have performed according to their potential and they have been faithful, doing what the master has required of them and he entrusts them with more authority, inviting them to enter his "joy."

(It must be said, though, that the master's willingness to earn money at the expense of others challenges any allegorical interpretation of the parable that would directly correlate him with Jesus, who never acts in a manner to seek personal gain. That a wealthy landowner would behave in this manner, however, makes the story all the more compelling.)

In its literary setting, told to the people of the day, perhaps the risk-taking trusty servants are Jesus's disciples who have given up everything, risked all, in their support of him and Jesus tells this story to his disciples to prepare them for the days ahead when their faith will be tested. This parable depicts how the disciples are to demonstrate their faithfulness as they anticipate the return of the Lord. The third slave, clearly expects to be commended for his carefulness with that which was entrusted to him but instead receives condemnation, may well represent the pious Jewish religious authorities of the day, who seek personal security by enforcing every petty observance of the law. They even tithe mint and cumin, Jesus had said, and by this policy of selfish exclusiveness made the religion of Israel barren.

What does faithfulness look like in their time of waiting? In Matthew's Gospel, faithfulness is emulating the ministry of Jesus. Jesus has announced the arrival of God's kingdom by feeding the hungry, curing the sick, blessing the meek, serving the least and supporting the outcast. All who would follow Jesus are to preach the good news of the kingdom to the whole world by going about the work that the master has called them to do. This work includes visiting the sick and imprisoned, clothing the naked, welcoming the stranger, and feeding the hungry. Those who are found faithful may hear their Master say, "Well done, good and trustworthy servant."

Not for the first time I wonder at the thoughts of those responsible for the formulation of the Lectionary, since the verse immediately preceding it, verse 13 of Chapter 25, says "therefore stay alert, because you do not know the day or the hour", which seems to me to be the crux of the whole parable.

And in our epistle, the last chapter of 1 Thessalonians, Paul is concerned about the return of Jesus Christ.

The day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. This 'thief' has not given advance notice to anyone; not even the Son knows, nor the angels in heaven as we are told in Mark's gospel; but it will be stark and unpredictable, like a pregnant woman's labour pains, abrupt, impossible to predict and inexorable. "Sudden destruction" will surely fall on complacent assurance of "peace and security", (perhaps an allusion to imperial Rome's motto, *Pax et Securitas*). The biblical writers have a way of unsettling this world's confident governments, which invest trust in their own power instead of God's.

Paul tells the church of Thessalonica that they are "sons of light and sons of the day"; God is light and the notion of staying awake and not falling asleep shows that Christians are not in the dark. Neither should the church lull itself into religious complacency; "keep awake and be sober". Night-time reveals who is alert, who is asleep, and who's drunk, (although why Paul imagines that it is only possible to get drunk at night, I cannot imagine). Christians do not wear their responsibilities lightly; they conduct themselves sensibly and with restraint. Christ died for us that we may be made whole and may live with him. This is true of Christians still alive and alert as "children of the day" and is true also of those who have fallen "asleep" in death. It is clear from this passage that Paul considered the return of Jesus to be in his lifetime, very soon, and because he does not speculate on what happens between death and redemption, neither need we. Let us concentrate on what concerns Paul; assurance of a future salvation that now brings to the surface faith, love, and hope.