

The Ultimate Parable

Jesus brought His ministry of instructing His disciples to a close by telling them this parable, the last one He gave, according to Matthew. It's in Chapter 25, usually titled "The Parable of the Talents." Jesus typically ended His sermons with a trenchant warning. This parable that ends His discipleship training is a promise of reward and likewise a warning, and a dire one at that. I'm sure many of my readers are familiar with it. Let's look at it again.

A certain man had much property and servants to care for it. Before going on a journey he gave money to each of 3 servants to use to steward his property during his absence. To one, who had much ability, he gave millions of dollars. To the next, of somewhat lesser ability, he gave less money, but still quite a sizable amount. And to a third servant, with even less ability, he gave somewhat less money. And he went off on his trip. There seems to have been an understanding that the servants as faithful stewards were to invest the money so that on his return there'd be a return on his investment. The first two indeed invested the money so that there was a handsome, 100% return. The third, however, buried in the ground for safe-keeping the money the owner had entrusted to him.

When the owner at last returned, he was delighted with the return on investment of the first two servants. Each one did well according to their abilities with what was entrusted to them. Evidently, considerable effort was carried out to gain this return. They worked hard at their task. So the owner rewarded them with even greater responsibilities on his estate [presumably with greater privileges as well, and perhaps greater status]. And note this: the 1st two servants' reward for faithfulness was the same. Most of the remaining text deals with the 3rd servant.

The 3rd servant dug up and returned the money to the owner, saying he was afraid of the owner. So to keep it safe he buried it. The owner however wasn't deceived by that, calling the servant "lazy and wicked." That servant was, in fact, unfaithful in what he was responsible to do. He didn't steward the owner's investment faithfully. The owner dispatched that 3rd servant into oblivion, to suffer for his irresponsibility.

We all understand that the 3rd servant was lazy. He didn't want to put in the effort necessary to gain any return. But how was he wicked? In biblical days, it was common to bury prized possessions in the ground for safekeeping. There were no safe deposit boxes, nor steal-proof, fire-proof, water-proof vaults. The issue isn't that he hid the money in the ground. Rather, it's that he did nothing with the money! He didn't seek to gain a return for the owner, his master, as he was instructed. He disobeyed his master. He was indifferent to his master's desire and will; he was indifferent to his master. He was an unfaithful servant, an unfaithful steward. In this way he was wicked. His master called him "worthless."

What was that 3rd servant thinking? Perhaps he thought the owner would never return, so the money would be his. He probably thought that if he deposited it in the bank, the account would have to be titled in the name of the owner, so he couldn't ever own it. Maybe he thought he'd make a poor investment and lose the master's money altogether. He would have to be diligent in making investments, working hard at it, and he simply didn't want to do that. Fearful of his master, he simply buried the money to give it back on his master's return, if he returned. Regardless his thoughts, he didn't produce what the master expected, as he was commanded to do. He was wicked and was punished for it. He would have no part in the owner's estate in the future. Let's be sure we see how this parable ends: this 3rd servant didn't merely forfeit a reward, he was disastrously punished.

Now, what does this mean to us? This is extremely heavy, it's a lesson that's exceedingly important to every follower of Jesus. We absolutely must heed this lesson. We're prone to regard Jesus' parables as irrelevant because Paul's letters to the churches tell us all we need to know, viz., that we're saved eternally and securely by believing in Jesus [whatever that means to us]. So, we presume, we can safely ignore these parables. Wrong! Let's think this one through carefully.

To interpret this text, we need to keep in mind the following: First of all, Jesus came to bring in the promised Kingdom. His preaching was, "The kingdom is imminent, so repent." He was the King. And He was here. So what's in the background in the interpretation is not eternal existence in heaven but participation in the Millennial Kingdom, which is yet in the future due to the rejection of the King by His own people. But He will return one day and bring in the Kingdom. Entrance into the master's "joy" almost certainly refers to the coming Messianic Kingdom. Second, Matthew is writing to the Church for the Church. It's the Church that continues Jesus' work of preparing people for the Kingdom. Third, this

parable is for disciples. A believer in Jesus is a follower of Jesus is a disciple of Jesus. So this parable is for us. This parable is all about the judgment of believers' responsibilities while the Lord is ascended and exalted, waiting to Return.

And in our interpretation, let's understand that the "talents" represent the empowerment of each believer by the indwelling Holy Spirit. We each can be filled to different degrees and in different ways for different works. Not all of us are a Billy Graham, not all of us are a Mother Teresa, etc. Sharing the Gospel as a life-long effort even if leading only a few to Christ gets the same reward as Billy Graham who led countless thousands to Christ. We all have been gifted with the resource necessary to bear fruit, the Holy Spirit. We all, every one of us, can fulfill Jesus' command to "bear fruit." Jesus has invested His Spirit in us and He expects us to be faithful and return to Him all He expects from us. The Gospel carries with it not only privileges, but responsibilities. And we'll be judged for our faithfulness. If we're indifferent to His will, may God have mercy on us!

This parable is primarily and essentially a warning to us against being irresponsible. We cannot be passive; we are not here as spectators. We're not here to be indifferent to Jesus' will and command. We're not here to pursue life as we please in the assumption that our future is sealed and blessed. We're here as His servants to carry out His will for us. The *bema* judgment will be too late for us to repent. We have this parable to instruct us. So, what if we're unfruitful? From this parable (and others), it would seem that the punishment will be non-participation in the coming Millennial Kingdom. The faithful stewards will have great roles to fill in that Kingdom, but the unfaithful probably won't even be there.

We need to understand this parable in biblical context. Jesus came to bring in the promised Kingdom, and that means preparing people to be in it. Thus His teachings and instructions, the cross and the resurrection, and the gift of the Spirit. And the New Testament. He chose disciples, followers, to continue His work during His absence until He returns. A disciple isn't a student like we are when we take a course in algebra or history (or whatever). A disciple abandons all that preceded his relationship to his master. A disciple is committed to being like the Master and to serving Him for the rest of one's life, obeying His instruction and, in turn teaching others to do the same. We're here to find and prepare others who will also be followers of Jesus, thereby preparing people, lots of people, for the Kingdom. Fruit-bearing is the mark of a true disciple. "Fruit" refers to fulfilling Jesus' commands and teachings as found in the New Testament. The fruit results by yielding to the indwelling, enabling Spirit—and not quenching the Spirit. And if we're in a loving, trusting relationship with Jesus, which is what "salvation" is, we'll do it.

Jesus evidently expects a return on His investment; He wants lots of people in His Kingdom. And God wants lots of people to be like Him, the beloved Son. So the parable's lesson seems to be, let's be faithful and, with zeal and commitment and, yes, hard work, fulfill our God-given responsibilities while we still have life and breath. We should be grateful for all that Jesus has done and will do for us, and be grateful for the gift of the Spirit entrusted to us. To be unfaithful is . . . Hey! We've been warned.

But there's more! This parable, as with most of Jesus' parables, has a twist to it. Everyone misses it, because it's so counter-intuitive, so deep. It's this: The owner allows his servants to keep the money!! Look at the text again. The owner is so vastly wealthy, the return isn't for him. The investment *and* the return, as it turns out, is for the servants. But the servants' *real* reward isn't the money. It is to enter into the joy of the owner and the privilege of having an even greater role in his estate. The owner is exalted by the faithfulness and love of his servants, not by the money. God is *a se*. His aseity means He has no need of anything. He is an infinite Being, lacking, wanting, needing nothing. He (and He alone in this cosmos) is independent and autonomous. And He is good. It's His nature to bless others, those who respond to Him with love. I suspect that this is intended, though not explicit: The 1st two servants loved their master. They worked hard at their task out of love. The 3rd servant . . . no love. He was too self-absorbed. It must have been his self-love that led him to be unfaithful. He hid the money so it was out of sight, as was the Master, so he could live as he pleased.

Christ has commanded us to serve Him for our blessing, for our benefit, for us to have this unique privilege of serving the Creator, Provider, Ruler, Redeemer and Judge of all with love and faithfulness. Our reward will be very great, but it comes in the future. The reward is for those who demonstrate their love by serving Christ faithfully, regardless the effort (and maybe risk) involved. To fail (for whatever reason) to serve Christ as He instructed demonstrates lack of love, which means forfeiting the intended blessings. The lesson in this parable couldn't be more relevant to us today.