

We just heard Jesus' so-called Parable of the Talents. This parable is potentially confusing. So I want to take a close look at it today

At this point in Matthew, we're almost to the end. After ch25, Jesus will sit down for one last meal with his disciples. Then he will be betrayed, arrested, and crucified. That gives his words in today's Gospel a special emphasis and urgency.

Jesus is about to leave his disciples behind. And so this parable is preparing them for what's expected of them when he's gone.

Jesus says, "God's kingdom is like a man who went off on a business trip. He summoned three of his servants. To one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one. Then he went away."

Now the word "talent" can be confusing for us. A talent in the Bible is not something you're good at. Instead, a Talent is a large monetary unit. It was equal to almost 16 years' salary. This guy leaves a total of 8 talents, split between his 3 servants, about 128 years' worth of wages to be split 3 ways—5 talents, 2 talents, and 1 talent. Any way you slice it, that's a lot of money.

After a while, the master returns after being away.

The servant given 5 talents comes back with 10. The servant given 2 comes back with 4. They both doubled their investment. They both receive the same praise from their master: "Well done, good and faithful servant (good and trustworthy slave); you have been faithful in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master."

However, the servant given one talent had buried it in the ground. This may sound strange to us. But in Jesus' culture that was the safest place to store money. It would be like us putting the money in a safe deposit box. He's keeping the money safe. Then he digs it up, and gives it back to his master.

But his master is displeased. Yes, the man kept the money safe. But there was no additional return. The servant hadn't even put the talent in the care of money changers to earn bit of interest. If you give someone a big chunk of change to take care of, you expect more than just keeping it safe. You expect some return on the investment.

So the master is irate and chews out the servant. Then, the master orders that the one talent be taken away and given to the man with the 10. And then in he orders that the servant who buried the talent be cast out into the outer darkness.

This seems rather harsh. This hardly seems fair. Take what little money the guy has left, and give it to the one with the most money. That might not sound to our ears like something Jesus might say.

But Jesus is not talking about money or possessions. The talents represent something far more important.

Jesus is talking in spiritual terms. The talents are gifts. They are gifts that he's entrusting to his disciples before he departs.

And for us, they're gifts we've been entrusted with. They're gifts of faith, gifts of grace. These are gifts to use in living in relationship with God. These are gifts to use in sharing God's good news.

The bottom-line message: We've got to use the gifts that are given us. We can't rest on our laurels. If we do, then our faith won't grow. God's church won't grow. It will simply stagnate. We'll be relying on what we believed in the past instead of working on growing in our relationship with God.

If you bury your relationship with God in the ground, and only dig it up and dust it off occasionally, then it's not going to thrive. You will have been a poor steward of the gifts God has given you. A part of the message of the parable of the talents is "Use it or lose it."

But when we talk about the parable of the talents, we often focus in on the 3rd servant, the one who buries the money. I've heard lots of sermons about how you shouldn't bury what God gives you like that wicked and lazy 3rd servant. That is an important thing. But we often miss another important piece of the parable. We forget about the first two servants. Those two servants who doubled their money.

The question arises, "How do you go about doubling your money? How do you turn 5 into 10?"

The answer is very simple, and yet a little bit disturbing if you think about it.

To turn 5 into 10, you risk losing the 5. To engage in investments that double your money over a short period of time means that you're putting your money at great risk.

"Put it all on red. Spin the roulette wheel..."<sup>1</sup>

That's extremely risky.

And yet it is to the two servants who risk his money that the master says, "Well done."

What if the two servants had lost their master's talents? How would the master had responded? Would he have chewed them out for losing his money? Or would he reward them for faithfully trying to use and risk what they've been given to the best of their abilities?

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks Fred Craddock!

In other words, is the master happy because the servants were successful? Or is he happy because they took risks? Is it more important to be successful, or to be faithful?

I believe the answer can be found in the master's response. He says, "Well done, my good and trustworthy slave. You have been faithful in handling this small amount." Notice he is praising the servant's faithfulness. He doesn't say, "Well done, you've made me a lot of money."

In fact, he downplays the money. He says, "You have been faithful in handling this small amount." To the master, these huge amounts of money are of little consequence. They're "small amounts." It's chicken feed to him. What he praises the servants for is their faithfulness, not their success. He praises them for trying to do their best with what they've been given, even if it means risking it all.

Plus there's one more piece here. Notice the 3<sup>rd</sup> servant's initial response:  
"Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours."

Don't miss what the third servant is saying to his master. I think you're harsh, and I'm afraid. The servant is afraid. He's afraid to risk. But he's also afraid of his master. And his words to his master are not loving. And this is an important piece of the parable as well.

If we're afraid of God our spiritual lives are going to be diminished. Now there's a different kind of fear the Bible mentions, the fear of the Lord, which is treating God with proper respect and honor and awe. But the fear expressed in this parable is not about being in awe of God because he's wonderful. The servant mentions being afraid of God because he's harsh.

And if you're afraid of God, you might be less inclined to step out there and take risks. And your life will actually be impoverished. You'll be afraid to live out God's purposes for you, the purposes you're created for. And you'll be unable to live into your mission. It takes confidence to take risks.

In life, we know that if you want to do big things, you have to take risks. A batter can't hit a home run without the very real risk of striking out. A quarterback can't throw a 50-yard pass without staying in the pocket and risking getting sacked by the defense.

God calls us to attempt big things, not out of fear, but out of loving obedience. Love the Lord your God. Love your neighbor as yourself. Feed the hungry. Preach the Gospel to all nations. These are big tasks. And we can't do these things unless we are willing to take risks. We're called to live in mission mode, not maintenance mode.

As members of the church, we live in difficult times. It is very hard to be a Christian in 21st century in America. To live as Christians in this culture demands our very best.

There have been times in history when it was very easy to be a member of the church. There have been times in the past when society expected you to believe in God, to go to church,

to live a Christian life. This is not one of those times. Today, church on Sunday morning is only one option out of many. Today, following Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior is only one option among many. To do these things in our culture requires sacrifice and risk. Being a Christian today demands our very best.

This is not Little League. This is the Major Leagues. God created us to live in these times. It is God's will that we are here at this time and in this place to do his work. The task before us is not easy. That means that God has called us to be his first-string team in the big-league game.

Much is expected of us. God doesn't want our leftovers. God doesn't want our second-rate efforts. God doesn't ask us to bury our gifts. Instead, God asks us to use what we've been given to the fullest. God calls us to live faithfully. God asks us to take risks. God wants our very best efforts. Not out of fear, but out of love.

Besides, that's what God gives us—his very best. And he does it out of love.

God the only-begotten Son gives up his life for us, on our behalf. Within days of the Parable of the Talents, Jesus will risk everything, not only risk his life but give his life for us. That's his purpose, that's why he was sent. That's why one of the last things he says on the cross is "it is finished," or more precisely, "it is accomplished." In other words, he says, 'I have done what I'm supposed to do with what God has given me.' And he does it out of love.

My prayer is that we may all use the gifts we have been given to our fullest potential, as a loving response to our loving God. And when the game is over we may all hear the words of our Master, "Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; come, enter into my joy." My joy.