

Judges 4:1-7  
Psalm 123  
1 Thessalonians 5:1-11  
MATTHEW 25:14-30

## The Parable of the Talents

We think of a “talent” as a “gift” someone has – an ability or skill. In first century Judea, a “talent” was not an ability or a skill – it was a unit of money worth 15 years wages for a laborer. To translate that into today’s terms, let’s take someone who works at \$10 an hour for 2,000 hours a year times 15: \$300,000. That’s serious money to most people.

So that’s the first key to understanding today’s Gospel story: the “talents” in the story were units of money. Second, the “talents” in this story were not given to the slaves to do what they wanted with forever, they were *loaned* to the slaves by their master, *who continued to own the money as well as them*, with the clear understanding that he, the master, expected the money back when he returned at some indefinite future time.

Remarkably, the master in the story gave the slaves no specific instructions as to what to do with his money. He left it to the imagination *and the attitude* of the slaves involved. The only thing Jesus tells us is that the master recognized that his different slaves had different levels of ability, but he *entrusted* even the “least able” one with 15 years wages – perhaps \$300,000 – the moderately able one with 30 years wages, and the most able slave with 75 years wages, a cool \$1.5 million, perhaps as someone investing as a venture capitalist might do.

The slaves who were considered to have moderate or great ability traded with their master’s money and each doubled it (I want to meet these guys!) – and then returned **all** of it, both what they had been entrusted with and that which they had gained – back to the one whose money it was. (I’m resisting making analogies with contemporary events in Washington, folks, you can work that out yourselves.)

The master was delighted with how the top two had done – and, no doubt, with their *attitudes* of faithfulness and delight in serving fruitfully – and their ready recognition that the money, and the gain, belonged to their master, that they would have had nothing had he not entrusted some of his wealth to them for a time. The master then promised the top two slaves *much more* responsibility, as though what he had previously entrusted to them was, *by the master’s standards*, pocket change. Hmm.

Now, this story does *not* say that the slaves *had to* double their master’s money to get a “passing grade” – that would be pressure! It *does* say that (even) extremely successful slaves did not become “full of themselves.” In fact, we do not know whether the master was delighted with them because of their success – *or* because of their humility and faithfulness. It could be just the latter. These two, however, took risks with faithfulness and humility, and when the risks on the trading floor were very successful, knew it was all possible because of their master and it belonged to him.

The third slave did not want to take any risks; he did the first century equivalent of sticking the money under his mattress. The master tells him that if he had wanted a risk-free activity, the slave could have opened a money market account in an FDIC insured bank, and at least the master would have earned some interest on the master's money, implying that, in economic terms, would have been satisfactory behavior.

What truly angered the master was the *attitude* of the third slave, who accused the master – who entrusted this venture capital to him! – of “reaping where he did not sow” and “gathering where he did not scatter.” The third slave begrudged the master's generosity and trust and, by so doing, condemned himself. (Jesus, remember, also told the story of the prodigal son, who wasted his whole inheritance in wild living – but repented and returned to his father with humility, and who as a result was restored to full sonship, so these stories are not about economic success but about attitude toward God.)

So the “worthless slave” with the nasty attitude was thrown out “into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” Judgment Day came for the slaves: two “entered into the joy of their master” in the Kingdom of Heaven and received far more than they had previously been entrusted with, the other was thrown out with nothing.

God, like the master in the story, is the *owner* of all creation. As God says in Psalm 50:12b, “The whole world is mine and all that is in it.” God, like the master in the story, *entrusts us* with part of what belongs to God – whatever money we win, inherit, earn or obtain in any way – and gives us *freedom* to do what we will with it, and leaves it up to us what *attitude* we bring to money, and to God. God promises there will be a “final exam” for each of us, and one of the key questions will be, “What did we do with our money – God's money – and with what attitude towards it, and towards God?” Thank God, God grades for effort, not percentage returns, and God grades even more for *attitude*.

Let's imagine the slogans the different slaves might have used. The last slave was not willing to lift even a finger to serve God; his slogan was “me first.” In refusing to serve God he defeated himself by himself: without even trying, he said, “No, I can't.”

The other two slaves had different slogans. Not even “country first” – a very fine slogan for a presidential campaign – their slogan was “**God first.**” And because they had “God first” as their approach, they were then able to say not “No, I can't” but “**Yes, we can.**” (I trust that slogan is now in the public domain.)

So that's the basic choice people have with what they have been entrusted with God – whatever it is, the amount doesn't matter, the attitude does. A Down's syndrome child giving a dollar to help someone else trumps a selfish multi-millionaire Nobel Prize winner every time in this competition, every time.

And looking back in history, if the apostles had taken the attitude of the third slave and kept the great Good News of Jesus Christ's saving death for the sins of the world and resurrection to bring new life to all believers to themselves and “buried it in the ground,” Christianity would have been stillborn. In which case, we here would all be “living lives of quiet desperation” exclusively, we would still be chained to our sins forever, and we would die without hope and without a future.

Instead, the apostles, the rest of Jesus' followers and generations of their successors took the risk of going out into the world with what the Master entrusted to them – and found that when they gave what they had, it doubled. They lived joyfully and generously in the world, nothing like the ungrateful, nasty miser who was the third slave.

One hundred and thirty-six years ago, a group of Christians willing to take the risk of generosity and faith gathered on a hill half a mile from here and laid the cornerstone of a church to be named for an apostle whose first act recorded in the Bible was to make a generous gift to the original apostles for the relief of the poor and the spread of the Gospel, a man nick-named “Son of Encouragement” by the original apostles. The people who, with their own hands and money, built the first St. Barnabas Episcopal Church in these parts built it in a town which had barely 2,000 widely scattered people. But our forefathers and foremothers asked “Should we do this? And they answered “*God first.*” Then they asked “Can we do this?” and they answered “*Yes, we can.*”

Throughout our history in this community, we the people of St. Barnabas have faced many ups and downs, many challenges of many kinds. Ten years ago we faced the challenges of growth, looked at our tiny building and great opportunities, took a deep breath and said, “God first” and “Yes, we can.” We built the sanctuary we now worship in. We faced the challenges of diversities, plural, such as relatively few churches our size have – and one “expert” intoned that it was “impossible” for us to be who we were and wanted to be. Together, young and old, newcomers and old-timers, married and single, rich and poor, gay and straight, people of many colors and many countries gathered here to worship and serve God said, “God first” and “Yes, we can.”

Now we gather in an age of economic anxiety, when the *false gods of materialism* which have bewitched so many Americans are having their dominance of many hearts and minds challenged as never before in my lifetime. Is it a difficult time to take the risk of faith and be as generous as each of us can be in accordance with our individual circumstances? Sure, that's why our life together requires a team effort, with many people making willing voluntary commitments in proportion to their incomes. Is this also a time of great opportunity, a time to reach out to people who may be hungry as never before to come to know and serve the **real God** who made them, loves them and gave 100% of himself to offer them hope and salvation? Absolutely.

God has put us first – creating us human beings, entrusting to us a beautiful and abundant planet, blessing us with vast abilities, daring to give us extraordinary freedom. And when we human beings messed up, God came to us in person in Jesus Christ to offer us companionship in our journeys through life, healing, understanding, community, faith, hope and love. *Forever.* He gave 100% of himself: his life.

In response, we are asked to put God first in our lives. If we do, we find that in so many ways together we can say, “Yes, we can.”

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