

The Parable of Our Talents

Matthew 25:14-30

Cradock Presbyterian Church

November 10, 2013

The point to this sermon is the trust that the master places in the slaves. What he entrusts them with is more than something material: he trusts them to do what they know they ought to do, out of loyalty and love to him.

When you hear this parable, you can't help but think of "talents" in modern terms. Maybe that's how you've always heard it preached. We talk about "talents" as things you're good at doing, like doing art, or playing or singing music, or doing carpentry, or cooking; you know, things other people can point at and say, "Wow, you're really talented at that." Set that aside for a moment, and go back to the first century to understand. The talent in this parable is a unit of money – nothing more. A talent was actually a unit of weight, and it was a fairly large amount, something just under 80 pounds in our measure. How much is that? One commentary says it was equivalent to *fifteen YEARS* worth of wages for a common working man. By putting it in weight, Matthew is trying to tell us that it was probably gold or silver coin. If that's true, and you'll see why it probably is later, then a talent *is* that huge a sum of money. Now, even *one* talent is a lot of money to be entrusted with, so to entrust one of the slaves with FIVE talents, and another with two, is just that much more amazing. Why the different amounts?

Well, the master "gave to each according to his ability," as the scripture says. I think it probably more means "experience"; this master felt pretty confident in the first slave, probably based on his track record; and he felt confident in the second slave, too;

and he even had some confidence in the third slave, though he might not have worked for him as long or had as much experience. Good masters know who they can trust! And THIS master must have trusted all three of them pretty much, because he didn't leave them any instructions on what to do with the money. All the scripture says is that "he went away." It doesn't matter what he went away for, because the point here is the trust he placed in these slaves. In those days, you didn't have a cell phone or e-mail to help you keep track of what your people were doing. Now, we have to be careful. I think we've fallen into a trap over the years. We look at the first slave, who got five talents, and we think, "Whoa! This guy must be great!" And we look at the second, who got two, and we think, "He must be pretty good, too!" Then we look at the guy who got only one, and we say, "This guy musta been a slack dog!" – since he only got one. That's a mistake! Remember, we're talking about *fifteen years wages* for a working man here. What's the median income in the U.S. now, about \$50,000? In today's money, each talent was worth something just under a million dollars. So even ONE talent is a big deal. I mean, how much do you need? If you had a million dollars, wouldn't you feel rich? Even entrusting *one* talent was a huge, huge thing. He did it, this master did; he gave them his money, then he went away.

The first slave was obviously a well-connected guy. With confidence, he took off immediately and went out to make that money work. That's what we see in the original language: the words literally mean he "worked with" the money. They didn't have investment firms in those days; to make money grow, you had to get out there in the

marketplace, and do thing like buying produce or goods of some sort and reselling them. Or maybe contracting to do a job for someone, then hiring workers and going and doing it. The point is, to make money *work*, YOU had to work – really hard. This first slave must have worked hard, but smart, too; he ended up *doubling* what his master had given him in trust. The second slave must have been pretty sharp and must have worked pretty hard, too; we read that "in the same way" he took the two talents, and he also doubled them. Now, I know in today's market, getting your money to double is hard to do; in those days, it would have been at least as hard. So the work of these first two slaves was just outstanding. But then we come to the third slave, to whom the one talent was given.

We can only guess what he was like. Could he have been one of those classic underachievers? Or a person who couldn't take the initiative to do ANYTHING, but had to have explicit, detailed, take-me-by-the-hand orders? Maybe he was just plain lazy, he didn't want to work as hard as the first two slaves. There's a real danger in trying to psychologize the scripture text beyond what it reads. But in this case, the description of his actions tells you plenty. In those days before modern, insured banking, it was held in common belief that the safest place to keep something was buried in the ground secretly. In fact, it became accepted *in the law* that you *couldn't be held accountable* for the loss of anything you had properly, secretly buried in the ground. Our modern-day equivalent is the safety deposit box, perhaps. You won't earn anything by putting your money or valuables there, but they're safe and insured. This last slave was not thinking

of how he could please his master, or even what might be expected of him, or what was right to do. He was thinking only about himself, and how he could stay out of trouble. He didn't see the talent he'd been entrusted with as an OPPORTUNITY to please his master, but as a RISK, a chance for failure. So he dug a hole, and hid the money – that's how we know it was probably coins – and it would remain there for a long time, until his master's return.

Finally, that day came.

The master had been gone long enough that he had to go through an almost formal accounting with each of his slaves. The first slave had a glowing report. Remember, five talents was a LOT of money; making even one more talent would have been a 20% return, good in our day, GREAT in theirs. But he had brought back an extra **100%! -** a complete DOUBLING of what he had been entrusted with, and a stunning achievement. His master was touched, and pleased! NRSV translates "Well done!", but we should really translate it with some exclamation like "All right!" or "Great job!" And then he goes on to laud the work of this slave, calling him "good and trustworthy", or, in the translations you're used to, "good and faithful servant". You know that's bound to be music to this slave's ears; and the music probably got louder and sweeter when he heard the master tell him that he was going to be put over EVEN MORE things. There was reward for that kind of service; being put over more usually meant an upgrade in your living quarters, and in closeness to your master. That's probably what "enter into the joy of your master" means. The second slave, too, receives the praise and

commendation of the master. Though he only had two talents entrusted to him, he did the same great job of doubling them, and pleased his master just as much. He must have been just as pleased with this second slave, because the master uses the same words to praise him as he does the first slave, and you hear that the same rewards came his way, as well.

But into this joyful scene comes the third slave, with a large black cloud hovering over him. "Here you have what is yours" was a legal formula taken from commerce at the time. By saying it, and showing the accounting, you freed yourself from any legal problems with the money or property which had been entrusted to you. That's some way to greet your long-absent master on his return! As far as his description of the master, there's *another* slap in the face. Not the words about the master's reaping where he did not sow, and gathering where he did not scatter seed – these just described a tough businessman, and could have been used to describe many other successful businessmen of the time. But because of these tough practices, this little coward of a slave accuses his master of being "harsh", or you could say, "rough", and blames his master for his own actions! If you were that master, how would you feel, coming back after a long time away, and hearing this from a slave in whom you'd placed your trust?

This stupid slave, this third one, wrecked himself by his own words. Yes, he knew how hard-driving a businessman this master was, so he should have known exactly what to do without needing any instructions. But out of his own selfishness, out of his

own misguided self-interest, and out of plain old fear and cowardice, he didn't do it. The master's anger was legitimate, and his decisions on dealing with him were justified. Even though he only got one talent, that was still a LOT of money, and a lot of trust. Nor was it unfair to give him that much trust – after all, the master DID give to each of them according to what he knew they could do. But this last slave betrayed the trust that his master had had in him. Even if he had wanted to be safe, and cover his own rear end, he had a way to help his master: he could have gone to the money people of his day and invested it, in their equivalent of a CD; yes, they had those types of things in that day and time. The return wouldn't have been as great, but it would have been *something*, and it would have been as safe as burying it in the ground. He didn't even consider that, apparently; he wanted the maximum way to look after his *own* welfare.

Well, slaves who don't want to live up to their master's trust are pretty useless to the master; and guess what happens to you when you're useless to your employer? You get dismissed. The work that had been entrusted to him – this one talent – is given to another slave who's shown HE'LL do what the master needs him to do with it. And then the "worthless" slave – you can also translate the same word "useless" – gets the gate. And where does he go? He goes into the "outer darkness," the place farthest removed from the light and joy of the master's inner circle. It's a place where people weep and wail out of the anguish of their total rejection, and a place where they grind their teeth from the pain of it all.

You might wonder which of the first two slaves compares to us. If you do, you're missing the point, because I think we have to compare ourselves with the last slave, to whom was entrusted *only one thing*. WE are like that slave because WE have been entrusted with only one thing, a thing of enormous value. That thing is the Good News of Jesus Christ. This is a HUGE amount of trust. Unlike that last servant, we have been entrusted with it REGARDLESS of any of our abilities, because we've been given the Holy Spirit to make up for whatever we lack. Our master Jesus Christ is not here, but he *will* return some day. Just like the master of the slaves in this parable, our Lord is a hard-driving master, too: he is bent on calling all of God's children back to God. While he's gone, he entrusts you and me to work with what we've been given, so that it may indeed increase, and more of those lost children will turn back to God. Remember, we have an advantage that those slaves didn't have: we have the Holy Spirit working with us, sent by God to help us. I'm convinced that the way we work with what is entrusted to us is to share that Good News with others, and to let our joy be reflected in our living, as well. If we work hard with this one thing! – and not just bury it here in the safe ground of the church, then it *will* grow and increase, and be doubled and tripled and even grow beyond that. The reward? Well, that's where things get *real* different: we already have the reward, eternal life with our Lord and our God. We have already “entered into the joy of our Master.” In our baptisms, we've been guaranteed that joy, if we just remain faithful. When we are faithful, I'm quite sure that our master is touched and pleased, and you and I know that he rewards us in many ways. And as we prove the trust God has in

us, guess what? – we end up being entrusted with more, and more, and eventually, with responsibilities beyond what we could ever expect, and joys beyond calculation. The path this church is taking now, to try a new thing, to try and reach those lost children all around us, is just the opposite of playing safe, looking to protect ourselves.

But there is a caution. God in Christ IS a hard-driving master, absolutely determined to bring the full number back to the family. Yet out of love God leaves the work for US to do, just as the master of those slaves left the work to them. And he gives us the Holy Spirit as our help and our comfort. If we will not do what we know is expected of us, the work we're all called to do in different measure, then will the work be given to others, just as happened to the useless slave?

It's time to get our investing shoes on, and begin working with what we've been entrusted by our master.