

THE PARABLE OF THE TALENTS

Matthew 25:14-30

Let's turn to Matthew 25:14, to what is called "the parable of the talents." The Olivet Discourse, found in Matthew 24-25, is coming to a close. In these chapters, Jesus has answered His disciples' questions about the signs of His coming, the signs of the end of the age, and the timing of His return (which is none of our business, He says in Matthew 24:36). He has also answered two questions that they didn't ask. First, what does the end of the age look like, and second, how are we to live who find ourselves between His first and second comings?

The parable of the talents focuses on how all people, not just Christians, should live. It can be simply outlined in three parts: setting, response, and outcome.

Let's begin with the setting.

THE SETTING

Matthew 25:14-15

14 "For it is just like a man about to go on a journey,
who called his own slaves and handed over his possessions to them.

15 And to one he gave five talents,
to another, two,
and to another, one,
each according to his own ability;
and he went on his journey."

(Matthew 25:14–15, 2022 LSB)

This is a parable, not a historical narrative.

The man going on a journey is God.

The slaves are every human being from Adam onward. They are slaves and not sons because Adam's fall changed the nature of our relationship with God. Before they sinned, Adam and Eve could be called children of God. They forfeited that relationship when they sinned and died spiritually.

Notice that the master entrusted to each one **according to his ability**. The Lord does not gift us

identically, use us identically, transform us identically, or entrust us with His riches to the same degree.

The duration of the journey is the length of a person's life.

What are the talents? This will take a couple of minutes.

In English, a talent is a special or unique ability. We think of people with creative, artistic, or athletic talents. Some have the talent of making money or designing bridges. I'm blessed to have a natural musical talent, but I have no talent for drawing.

Does all that make sense? OK, good.

Now, forget everything I just said. The word *talent* in Matthew 25 has nothing to do with special abilities. It comes from the Greek word *talenton*, and it is a measure of weight equal to about 75 pounds. That's all it means. It is only a measure of weight without any hint of what the substance being weighed is. Someone could have a *talent* of grain or cheese or sand, and all it would mean is that they had 75 pounds of grain, cheese, or sand.

Matthew 25:18 makes it clear that the master entrusted his slaves with money. Since this is a Kingdom parable that ends with eternal life and eternal judgment, I think it's safe to assume that the substance being entrusted is gold.

Now, we understand that sometimes translators didn't understand the original word. One of the best (and most humorous) examples of this is First Chronicles 26:18:

**18 At the Parbar on the west
there were four at the highway
and two at the Parbar.
(1 Chronicles 26:18, 2022 LSB)**

What's a *parbar*? No one knows. They couldn't translate it because they didn't know what it meant.

But why would the translators of our English Bibles use a word like talent, which exists in English but means something different than the biblical text? I can't give you a full answer, especially this morning. I am going to spend some time on this next Sunday night.

But let me give you a couple of things to think about. First, the Greek word here – which is *talenton* – is only used in this passage. When John Wycliffe translated it in 1380, he didn't know what it meant, so he just used the word talent, which it closely resembles. Other early translations followed his lead: the Tyndale in 1526, the Geneva in 1560, and the King James in 1611.

I think modern translations have kept it because it is so familiar.

Do you remember the first words of Psalm 23? That's right: the Lord is my shepherd. Almost every English translation says the same thing: the Lord is my shepherd. The Douay-Rheims Bible, which is a translation of the Latin Vulgate from 1790, says, the Lord ruleth me. The Lord is my Shepherd. The Lord ruleth me. Which do you prefer? Probably, "the Lord is my shepherd." Why? Because it's more accurate? Or because it's more familiar?

Most Bibles use *talent* in Matthew 25 because of familiarity; let's not be too hard on them.

Now, what do these talents of gold represent in the real world? They are not different *substances* but different *amounts* of the *same* substance. I believe that the asset God gives is knowledge of Himself. That knowledge comes through different means.

Every human being knows in their heart that God exists. Romans 1:18 says that most suppress that knowledge; they can only suppress it because it exists. You know, I've never met anyone who was angry at the existence of Bigfoot or unicorns. Why? Because Bigfoot and unicorns are mythological. But God is not a myth. Every person knows He exists. The reason that so many are bitterly angry at the idea of God's existence is not because He is a myth but the exact opposite: He is not a myth, and they know it.

Our knowledge of God is expanded in creation. Psalm 19:1 says,

**1 The heavens are telling of the glory of God;
And the expanse is declaring the work of His hands.
(Psalm 19:1, 2022 LSB)**

Romans 1:20 says that creation reveals God's eternal power and divine nature so clearly that those who worship creatures instead of God are without excuse. That is, the person who has never seen a Bible has no excuse when they worship a creature instead of the God whose eternal power and divine nature are revealed in creation.

Beyond this, God has revealed Himself in Scripture. Hebrews 1:1 says that God spoke long

ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways. His Word was put into written form in order to benefit all, not just those who heard it on the day He spoke.

And of course, God's revelation was made perfect in Jesus Christ. Hebrews 1:2-3 says,

2 [God] in these last days spoke to us in His Son,
whom He appointed heir of all things,
through whom also He made the worlds,
3 who is the radiance of His glory
and the exact representation of His nature,
and upholds all things by the word of His power ...
(Hebrews 1:2-3, 2022 LSB)

Jesus is the perfect, final, complete revelation of God to man. Jesus taught His apostles, and they in turn were moved by the Holy Spirit to put that revelation in writing. All the words of the New Testament are the revelation of Jesus Christ to mankind. All the Scriptures, from Genesis to Revelation, are God's Word to mankind.

The man in the parable entrusts vast amounts of gold to his slaves. Yahweh God, who created all things, has entrusted the revelation of Himself to mankind through our own hearts, creation, the Scriptures, and ultimately, Jesus Christ.

Let's move on in the parable. Matthew 25:16-18 describes the response of the slaves.

THE RESPONSE

Matthew 25:16-18

16 "Immediately the one who had received the five talents went and traded with them, and gained five more talents.

17 In the same manner the one who had received the two talents gained two more.

18 But he who received the one talent went away, and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money."

(Matthew 25:16-18, 2022 LSB)

The first two slaves responded positively.

We see that they responded *immediately, energetically, and effectually*.

They responded immediately. They didn't waste any time.

They responded energetically. They acted on what they had received.

They responded effectually. They knew how to best use the gold entrusted to them. Both doubled the money entrusted to them.

The saints of God throughout biblical history acted in just the same way. God called Abram to leave Ur of the Chaldees, and he left. God sent Moses back to Egypt, and he went. As soon as Jesus heard that John had been arrested, He began His public ministry. Within minutes of the Holy Spirit coming upon the apostles, Peter was preaching in Jerusalem. Within a few days of regaining his sight, Saul of Tarsus was preaching Christ in the synagogues of Damascus.

I know this about each of you who has trusted the Lord. The moment He gave you faith, you trusted Him. You began to follow Him and learn of Him. Your faith has grown over the years. You have grown in faithfulness.

The third slave responded negatively. There was **no urgency** in him to respond quickly. He **expended minimal energy**, digging a hole just big enough to conceal the money entrusted to him. His actions were utterly **ineffectual**. The reality is that his existence made no difference to the master. The master may as well have kept the one talent entrusted to this man.

We understand that unbelievers have suppressed and ignored, and sometimes actively opposed, the revelation of God granted to them.

Remember, every person has at least the knowledge of God in their own hearts and the awareness of God's eternal power and divine nature in creation. The stone-age hunter-gatherers who lived in Papua New Guinea hundreds of years before Christ had that much. All are without excuse.

Others have been exposed to the Scriptures. Even before Christ, there were nations in the Middle East and North Africa who knew of the God of Israel and the writings of God's prophets. And certainly since Pentecost the Gospel of Jesus Christ has been preached virtually everywhere. I don't mean that the Gospel has been preached everywhere at the same time, of course. But remember, places where Christians are persecuted today were often solidly Christian in the centuries following Christ. Paul spent a lot of time in modern-day Turkey. The churches of Revelation 2-3 are all found in western Turkey. There was a strong Christian presence in China about 1,500 years ago. North Africa was once the intellectual headquarters of the church.

What every unbeliever has in common is that they have buried God's revelation by various means. They have suppressed the knowledge found in their own hearts. They have invented false religions and evolution so as to worship the creation rather than the creator. They have denied the truth and sufficiency of the Scriptures. Some have denied Christ's deity, others His humanity, and some insist that He never existed at all.

THE OUTCOME

Matthew 25:19-30

As there are two responses, there are two outcomes. Let's take the positive outcome first.

19 "Now after a long time
the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them.

20 And the one who had received the five talents came up
and brought five more talents, saying,
'Master, you handed five talents over to me.

See, I have gained five more talents.'

21 His master said to him,

'Well done, good and faithful slave.

You were faithful with a few things,
I will put you in charge of many things;
enter into the joy of your master.'

22 Also the one who had received the two talents came up
and said, 'Master, you handed two talents over to me.

See, I have gained two more talents.'

23 His master said to him,

'Well done, good and faithful slave.

You were faithful with a few things,
I will put you in charge of many things;
enter into the joy of your master.'

(Matthew 25:19–23, 2022 LSB)

The first two slaves have a good outcome; they double the master's money. Of course, the master isn't concerned about the profit; he calls the money "a few things." What he wants to know is whether these men are personally faithful to him. That's what he rewards. By the way, notice that the two faithful slaves receive exactly the same commendation, promotion, and reward. Their reward is not a percentage but the joy of the master.

This points us directly to eternal life with Christ. He inherits all things, and all those in Him will share in that inheritance. First Corinthians 2:9 says that no one has seen, heard of, or even imagined what God has prepared for those who love Him. Ephesians 1:3 promises us every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ. Romans 8:18 says that incomparable glory will be revealed to us. Second Corinthians 4:17 calls it an eternal weight of glory. The truth is that the Bible says very little about eternity to us; I think that's because we don't have the vocabulary or minds to grasp the enormity of it. I do believe what God has promised to us cannot be contained in this universe. Most important of all, we will share in the joy of our Lord and Savior.

But there is also a negative outcome.

24 “And the one also who had received the one talent came up and said, ‘Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow and gathering where you scattered no seed.

25 And I was afraid, and went away and hid your talent in the ground. See, you have what is yours.’

26 But his master answered and said to him, ‘You wicked, lazy slave, you knew that I reap where I did not sow and gather where I scattered no seed.

27 Therefore, you ought to have put my money in the bank, and on my arrival I would have received my money back with interest.

28 ‘Therefore take away the talent from him, and give it to the one who has the ten talents.’

29 For to everyone who has, more shall be given, and he will have an abundance; but from the one who does not have, even what he does have shall be taken away.

30 And throw out the worthless slave into the outer darkness; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

(Matthew 25:24–30, 2022 LSB)

A true fear of God will always lead to faith, worship, and service. Just about the worst thing the Bible says about unbelievers is, “There is *no fear* of God before their eyes.” (Romans 3:18). The Bible never describes anyone who fears God too much. The problem is always that they don't fear Him

enough.

The slave in the parable is called wicked and lazy. Likewise, unbelievers view God with contempt. They view every revelation about God with contempt. They suppress their innate knowledge of God, argue against what creation reveals about God, deny the Scriptures, and insult Christ.

And, exactly like the slave in the parable, they face being thrown into the outer darkness, where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth.

This slave claims to be afraid, but in fact, he is wicked and lazy. The true fear of God will cause people to worship and serve Him. If he were truly afraid, he would have banked the money and earned interest. This man acted out of self-preservation. He understood the master's authority but saw it as a threat to be avoided. He could not imagine that the master's authority could ever benefit him. His only accomplishment was to lose everything, including his own soul.

As we understand the parable, we realize that many people in this world – the majority, in fact – bury every last bit of knowledge of God. They suppress it in their own hearts. They redefine it in creation. They argue against the Scriptures and reject Christ.

And they face the loss of everything, including their own souls. Adam and Eve faced expulsion from the Garden but had a promise of a Redeemer and restoration. Those who reject the Redeemer face eternal expulsion from the Kingdom into outer darkness. They face an eternity of weeping and gnashing of teeth.

God created people to live forever, and all will. The question is where they will be and what sort of life they will have. Eternity is all about extremes. The unrighteous face a place completely devoid of light. There will be only suffering and never a moment of relief.

The faithful will be brought into a place that is nothing but light; God Himself will be our light. There will be nothing but peace and comfort with never a hint of sorrow or pain.

BRINGING IT HOME

Why did Jesus give us this parable? Because, beloved, God is not pretend, life is not a game, and judgment is real.

Those who respond faithfully to the revelation God has given them – which, the parable says, differs from person to person – will receive His blessing. They will be brought into His marvelous light and experience His joy for all eternity. There will never be even a hint of darkness, sin, or suffering.

Those who reject God's revelation – suppressing what they know in their hearts, ignoring the fingerprint of God in creation, rejecting His Word, and trampling on His Son – will be cast into outer darkness and suffer for all eternity.

If we had no sin, then the knowledge of God in our hearts and in creation would be completely sufficient. But sin makes us foolish and ignorant, and so He gave us His Word to make His revelation unmistakable and obvious. If sinners are without excuse when they ignore creation, how can they escape judgment if they ignore His Word and the Gospel?

On the one hand, the judgment faced by the wicked is indescribably horrible. The distance between God and man is infinitely vast. The record of our sins is complete and detailed.

On the other hand, restoration is simpler than anything else we do. Do you know this song?

*O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer,
gracious Savior of my ruined life!
My guilt and cross laid on Your shoulders;
in my place You suffered, bled, and died!*

*You rose! The grave and death are conquered!
You broke my bonds of sin and shame!
O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer,
may all my days bring glory to Your Name!
May all my days bring glory to Your Name!*

This is what God the Father purposed for us. This is what the God the Son did for us. This is what the Holy Spirit brings to pass in us.

Do you believe that Jesus Christ is your Rock and Redeemer? Do you believe that He is the gracious Savior of your ruined life? Do you believe that your guilt and cross was laid upon His shoulders? Do you believe that in your place He suffered, bled, and died? Do you believe that He rose, conquering the grave and death for all who believe? Do you believe that He has broken the bonds of your sin and shame? The final words of this modern hymn connect up beautifully with our

passage today. Good and faithful servants are simply those who trust in Jesus Christ and long for their lives to bring glory to His name.

Stand, and let's sing this hymn together.