

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

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Today's parable from Matthew is called *The Parable of the Talents and the Minas*. And the first thing to note is that this parable has nothing to do with talents in the sense of gifts, endowments or abilities. It isn't about how we use our particular and natural attributes, even if that is how it has often been seen. The word *talent* here refers to a measure of weight, then a unit of currency, in the first century; its synonym is *mina*. A *mina* or *talent* was the same as 60 shekels or 100 denarii. In today's currency it would be worth about \$475. In terms of first century equivalents, it would have been about a quarter of a manual laborer's annual wage --- that is, a very substantial amount in the reckoning of anyone listening to the parable.

The parable has also been viewed as concerning stewardship in a general sense which is why it is frequently cited in the fall in many churches, but that is not the central thrust of the parable which concerns stewardship *in relation to the kingdom*. Although important, the stewardship theme derives its significance within the context of Jesus' teaching about the kingdom and the future. This is particularly true in that the parable is eschatological, pointing to a crisis and judgment for the listeners. Since modern audiences are not particularly ready to deal with eschatology, ministers frequently resort to the theme of stewardship of one's resources.

The parable is found both in Luke and in Matthew, but Matthew's is thought to be nearest to the original. The context may have been the crisis produced by the ministry of Jesus rather than the future *Parousia* or Second Coming. Thus, it may have been part of Jesus' denunciation of the scribes, who had 'buried' the Law under the mass of their oral traditions and regulations.

Just a few notes on the text itself. The "day and the hour" of the last judgment will be like a day of reckoning. A "man going on a journey" would mean in Matthew's allegorical understanding of the parable, the ascension of Jesus to heaven. His servants would mean the followers of Jesus, and his property would likely be the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Hiding money or treasure in the ground was a common method of preserving it in the first century. The term "after a long time" refers to a delay in the return of Christ in the *Parousia*. When the text refers to the kingdom of heaven being like "a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants," the reference is to the Last Judgment which will be a day of reckoning.

Although it is among the longer of the parables and was important to the Evangelists, it has been neglected by scholars, and its meaning has remained somewhat unclear. Matthew places his version of the parable in his eschatological discourse on the return of Christ. This would place it after his triumphal

entrance into Jerusalem, the Temple incident, and questions of entrapment which were put to Jesus by his enemies. The events of the Passion follow immediately after this discourse.

We know that Matthew provides some emphasis on no one knowing the date of the coming of the Son of Man, and he gives prominence to themes such as watching, wisdom, and faithfulness. In this parable there is also emphasis on the praise of faithful servants, the importance of possessions which characterizes mankind, and exclusions from the presence of the returning master for the unfaithful. It appears likely that in both Luke and Matthew, the parable is directed to the disciples.

The parable is not about positive thinking and the use of one's abilities. Rather, it is the use one makes of the message of the kingdom that is at the heart of the story. This theme of faithfulness has to be related to the teaching of Jesus about both the present and the future kingdom of God. The knowledge of God's reign and salvation itself bring with them added responsibility. As agents on behalf of the kingdom, all those enlisted will be judged or rewarded in terms of that faithfulness. So, the overall theme is responsibility for action. Even if there is a delay in the arrival of the *Parousia*, eschatological faith remains central to the message of Jesus. "We know that God has acted decisively in Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, and we still believe that one day God will attain ultimate victory. One day evil will be set aside. The issue is how we live in *the in-between time*." If the parable "is not telling us how to obtain salvation, but....calling us to commitment to the one who truly is king and to faithfulness to his purposes."

Another way of putting it would be to say that "the parable is not a gentle tale about what Christians do with their individual gifts and talents, as helpful as that may be, but *a disturbing story* about what Christians do with the gospel as they wait for the coming of the kingdom of heaven." Some have asked the question: "is this a good riddle or a bad joke?...the punch line...seems to be that the rich get richer and the poor get poorer" when the third servant is treated as "wicked and lazy.... his property is given to the richest of the three...and he himself is cast into the outer darkness." The question can be answered in several ways. First, it encourages fruitful stewardship in the church. The servant "who buries his gift is like a tree that does not bear good fruit. He deserves punishment." On the other hand, the parable "exposes the challenges of faithfulness in a world dominated by power and wealth...because the first two servants multiply the dishonesty (of the rich man who achieved his wealth at the expense of others). The third refuses to participate in this system of oppression."

Viewed from the latter perspective, "the parable offers a clear-eyed analysis of the real world, perhaps leading the followers of Jesus to recall his earlier words about the cost of discipleship." Jesus offers the story a couple of days before his arrest and execution, event which will testify to the world's penchant for punishing those who speak truth to power."

*Blessed Lord, who caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant us so to hear them, read, mark, learn and inwardly digest them, that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of eternal life, which you have given us in our Savior Jesus Christ.*

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

#### Sources

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