

## **THE PARABLE OF THE TALENTS**

Matthew, in chapters 24-25, records the Lord's heart of compassion and love mingled with unwavering holiness. This section of Scripture, including the Parable of the Talents, constitutes final warnings, prophecies, and encouragements to His people Israel prior to His departure. He, who is their Lord, is leaving for an undisclosed period of time. He is delegating to them the responsibility, as stewards, to care for His kingdom. The Parable of the Talents, Matthew 25:14-30, impresses on them the weight of that responsibility and the serious consequences of neglecting to understand and apply His instructions. There is also a message to all mankind.

If the talents are talents of gold, the value of what the master entrusted to the stewards would be immensely high, in the millions of dollars. Since the Lord uses only the term "talents" we must make some assumptions, but it seems reasonable to assume that the owner of the talents, the man traveling into a far country, was a wealthy man. He is entrusting his wealth to three men who become stewards of his money. One receives five talents. Another receives two talents. A third steward receives one talent. Each is given a significant amount of money. These are stewards entrusted with the care of the money. The stewards must know the personality and character of their Lord. He expects them to know Him well enough to apply the spirit as well as the letter of His instructions. Those that do are richly rewarded. The others receive severe judgment. The amount given is based on each steward's ability. The first two understand the spirit and letter of instructions and the character of their Lord. They both use the resources by "trading" to gain a profit. Each of them makes a 100 percent profit. Fear and mistrust of his Lord motivate the third steward. He buries the money in the earth and returns the original amount. The profitable stewards are praised, given increased responsibilities and invited to enter into the joy of their Lord. The untrusting steward is scolded, rejected, and punished.

Those that believe Him will be rewarded in His kingdom. The basis of the reward will be their stewardship of His resources entrusted to them. Those who fear and do not believe will be rejected and judged. There is also a universal application to all mankind. From the time of the creation of mankind, each individual has been entrusted with resources of time and material wealth. Everything we have comes from God and belongs to Him. We are responsible for using those resources so that they increase in value.

### **ANOTHER COMMENTARY WITH A DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE**

The parable in question is the one concerning the rich man who gives talents to three of his servants and then sets out on a journey [**Matt 25:14-30**]. Upon his return, he assesses the situation and discovers that the servant to whom he had given five talents had invested them fruitfully and that the servant to whom he had given three talents had done the same. But he finds, to his chagrin, that the slave to whom he had entrusted one talent had simply buried the wealth and had garnered neither gain nor interest. Angered, he orders that the one talent be taken from the timid servant and given to the servant who had invested most boldly.

And then comes the devastating moral lesson: “For to everyone who has, more will be given and he will grow rich; but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away.”

The standard reading of this story—on display in thousands of sermons and fervorinos—is that the talents symbolize gifts and abilities that God has given to us and that he expects us to “spend” generously or “invest” wisely. This interpretation is supported by the fairly accidental relationship that obtains between “talent” in the ancient Biblical sense of the term and “talent” in ordinary English today. Fr. Schoenstene specified that a talent in ancient times was a measure of something particularly weighty, usually silver or gold. A single talent might represent as much as 50 pounds of precious metal and, as such, was not something that one carried around in one’s pocket. We might make a comparison between a talent and a unit of gold kept at Fort Knox, or an ingot of silver preserved in a safe deposit box.

What the contemporary reader will likely miss, and what the ancient Jewish reader would have caught immediately, is the connection to heaviness: a talent was weighty, and five talents was massively heavy. Heaviness would have brought to mind the heaviest weight of all, which was the *kabod* of Yahweh. That term was rendered in Greek as *doxa* and in Latin as *gloria*, both of which carry the connotation of luminosity, but the basic sense of the Hebrew word is heaviness, *gravitas*.

And this *kabod Yahweh* was to be found in the Jerusalem Temple, resting upon the mercy seat within the Holy of Holies. Therefore, what was heaviest (most glorious) of all was the mercy of God, which abided in infinite, inexhaustible abundance in the Holy Temple. In light of these clarifications, we can read Jesus’ parable with fresh eyes. The talents given to the three servants are not so much monetary gifts or personal capacities; they are a share in the mercy of God, a participation in the weightiness of the divine love. But since mercy is always directed to the other, these “talents” are designed to be shared. In point of fact, they will increase precisely in the measure that they are given away.

The problem with the timid servant who buried his talent is not that he was an ineffective venture capitalist but that he fundamentally misunderstood the nature of what he had been given. The divine mercy—received as a pure gift—is meant to be given to others as a pure gift. Buried in the ground, that is to say, hugged tightly to oneself as one’s own possession, such a talent necessarily evanesces. And this is why the master’s seemingly harsh words should not be read as the punishment of an angry God but as an expression of spiritual physics: the divine mercy will grow in you only inasmuch as you give it to others. To “have” the *kabod* Yahweh is precisely not to have it in the ordinary sense of the term.

What comes to mind here is the most famous of all of Jesus’ parables, namely, the story of the Prodigal Son. Using a term that also carried a monetary sense in ancient times, the younger son says, “Father give me my share of the *ousia* (substance or wealth) that is coming to me. Notice how in one sentence, he manages to mention himself three times! The father gives away his *ousia*, for that is all he knows how to do, but the foolish son squanders the money in short order. The spiritual lesson is the same: the divine *ousia* is a gift and it can be “had” only inasmuch as it becomes a gift for others. When we try to cling to it as a possession, it disappears. How wonderful that these ancient stories, once we unpack their spiritual significance, still sing to us today.