

# Keeping Your One Talent Above Ground

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## Matthew 25:14-30

Which of the servants in today's Gospel received the better amount from the Master? We often think it's the one who received five talents, since that is the greater number.

But some of Fathers of the Church say that it may be that the servant who received "only" one talent but, like so many who are privileged by God, did not do as well with his endowment as those who receive lesser blessings.

"Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is One alone," not many. Man and woman are one flesh, not two. The bridegroom in the Song of Songs says, "One is my dove." The Lord said to Martha: "One thing is necessary, and Mary has chosen the better part." The first apostolic community was "of one mind and heart." The apostle tells us, "There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all." We all partake of the "one loaf" of the Holy Eucharist. We profess, "I believe in one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church."

**Numbers are important symbols** or signs in our faith. They all point to one thing: God, who is the unique source and sole end of everything. The sacred authors of the Old and New Testaments were very much aware of the significance of numbers.

The traditional interpretations of the two testaments on the part of the Fathers of the Church, as well as the rabbinical scholars of the Jewish tradition, placed great importance on the meaning of even some seemingly occasional numbers in the Bible. This tradition makes its way down practically to our own times when we read in St. Louis de Montfort that the 153 fish caught in the miraculous draught of St. Peter symbolize the 153 Hail Marys of the rosary! (Now, with the luminous mysteries, there are 203 Aves, so one of my readers should come up with a meaning for that!). There are long passages of St. Augustine in which he luxuriates in explaining

numbers found in Scripture, and in this he follows Origen and many others in our tradition.

We must not think of this as a quaint or naïve perspective of ancient people. Our Lord's hearers were all from a tradition that would have immediately sought out the symbolic meaning of any number appearing in his teaching. It is our modern perspective that is far from the mentality of the New Testament, not that of those who lived at the time it was written.

**One thing is most clear** about all this, though: the symbolic use of numbers is very different from two things. One the one side, the biblical use of numbers is not a kind of numerology, if by that we mean an attempt to control things or predict the future with numbers; on the other hand, it is not meant to be a merely material counting-up of quantities or amounts of things. The biblical sense of numbers is a spiritual sense. If numbers were meant only as amounts or quantities, then one would not be the privileged number in our religion.

One is important, because it is a number that is the origin of all other numbers. It is a unity, as all numbers are, but it is the original one into which all others are brought back. One is the most universal number, practically identical with the being of things—since as complex as a thing may be, it cannot exist at all unless its aspects are united in one being. At the apex of all this are the teachings that there are three divine persons in the one God and that there are two natures that belong to the one person of the Incarnate Word, Jesus Christ. These multiples would not be the sublime mysteries they are without their being unities.

**So, taking some insights from St. Thomas Aquinas's** commentary on Matthew's Gospel, what can we make of the five, the two, and the one of this parable? Sts. John Chrysostom and Jerome, according to Thomas, make out the matter more or less in the following way:

The five talents are related only to material things, accessible to the five senses, and so the one who trades on these five makes five more. He increases material wealth. The two talents symbolize practical intelligence, or the ability to get things done, and so industry produces two more. The one talent represents "the one thing necessary" that we will have in heaven perfectly and here below imperfectly: namely, simple contemplative knowledge, not of material but spiritual things, not of practical and earthly but of lofty and heavenly things.

Thus the servant with one talent was called to be a contemplative, certainly a privileged position among the servants, and the most lofty. But he was

ungrateful, and did nothing with his gift, and so he lost everything, and his gift was given to the one who had received the lesser gift to begin with.

Here the Lord provides a warning to all those who follow him and who have knowledge of the truth but do not gratefully consider this knowledge by meditation and contemplation. People with worldly or practical gifts make generous use of them, and then those who have the clear knowledge of the truth show no gratitude for this gift and so lose it. What a lesson and warning to us who profess the Catholic Faith with all its high mysteries and grace-filled insights!

Our Lord once said that “the children of this world are wiser in their own generation than the children of light.” Can it be that those who have only material and this-worldly gifts value them and use them more effectively than we who have the mysteries of the Faith? Sad to say, yes, it can be so.

**How few are those who are**, so to speak, “entrepreneurial” in their use of the gift of revelation! St. Teresa of Calcutta, or John Paul II, or Thomas Aquinas, or Augustine accomplished so much simply by meditating on the word of God, without riches or worldly means. They accomplished more than those who had these things. Yet each full-faith Catholic has all the same things at his disposal. What am I doing with the contemplative mysteries that have been entrusted to me? What do I do with the mystery of the Savior’s real presence in the Blessed Sacrament, for example? Do I trade on it by constant prayer and grateful contemplation? Do I show even the slightest zeal for the talent I possess in comparison to those who have only this-worldly gifts?

Sadly, we even despise our gifts of faith and compare ourselves to those who are richer, more handsome, more successful in the world, who enjoy more bodily pleasures and social privileges than we do, as though we were blaming God for not giving us these lesser things, and “only” giving us the One thing necessary: himself!

It should not surprise us then if, as our Lord said, “tax collectors and prostitutes” (maybe today he would say “rich politicians and actors”) are entering the kingdom of heaven before us. Gratitude and hard work, after all, even for God’s lesser gifts, may gain for others what our own lack of gratitude for the graces of the true faith has lost for us.

May Jesus make us his fellow servants grateful for all the Master’s gifts, for the one precious gift we have: our Catholic Faith in the mysteries of salvation.