

Much has been written about this difficult parable. What it’s about is a matter of intense debate.

◆ The classic interpretation is that it is about ‘talents,’ that is, the aptitudes and abilities God has given us.

In that case, the moral of the story would be, Use them or lose them, your aptitudes, that is. Use them in service of the kingdom of God, or lose them to God’s judgment at the end of days.

My problem with that is in the parable itself: The master gives talents, varying from 1 to 5, to each of three servants “according to his ability.”

Talents are not the same things as abilities, it seems.

And for reward in the final judgment to be based on what God gives to each person seems unjust.

◆ A different interpretation, rather Calvinistic, equates “talents” with faith – faith in God or specifically faith that Christ will return in judgment.

In the Reformed tradition, we hold that our faith itself is a God-given gift. Our experience tells us that some people have more faith than others.

The ‘talents = faith’ interpretation has an advantage in explaining the justice meted out in the parable:

“Take the one unit of faith from the third servant, and give it to the one with the ten units of faith.

“For to all those who have” (faith, that is), “more will be given,

but from those who have nothing, even what faith they have will be taken away.”

The moral of the parable, then, is:

Faith not put to active use for the kingdom of God is of little value to God or humankind.

I can go along with that,

but what I keep looking for is an interpretation that can apply to Christ’s church as readily as individual Christians.

◆ That is what Liberation Theology offers: a mission for the church based on justice – economic, political, and social justice.

Liberation Theology got traction as a moral response to poverty in Latin America, circa 1960.

Proponents urge the church to fight poverty by addressing its alleged source: systemic injustice.

The church itself must distance itself from the sin of systematic oppression of the poor.

So, from a Liberation Theology viewpoint, the first two servants sinfully colluded with a market-based system stacked against the poor.

The point of the parable would be the third servant’s open resistance to the oppressive master.

One difficulty for me in taking this approach is in painting the master as an evil oppressor.

We have only the servant’s words to support that:

“I knew you were a harsh man, reaping where you do not sow, gathering where you do not scatter seed.”

But the storyline suggests otherwise:

To each servant, he entrusts great sums of money, which was not unheard of in those days.

One talent was worth about 15 years of wages.

To one servant, the most able, the master gives the equivalent of a lifetime of wages.

To the next able servant,
 he gives 30 years of wages.
 And to a third, a full year's worth of wages.
 The master attaches no conditions to the gifts,
 no do's and don'ts. He appears to trust all three.
 He is generous in proportion
 to each servant's ability.
 And when the master returns
 to get reports from the first two servants,
 he is extravagant with praise.
 To each, he exclaims, "Well done,
 good and trustworthy servant.
 You have been trustworthy in a few things.
 I will put you in charge of many.
 Enter into the joy of your master."
 These are not words of oppression,
 but redemption.
 For all these reasons,
 I think other actions and words
 of Jesus are more supportive
 of Liberation Theology than this parable.
 All three approaches to the parable have merit.
 I'm still looking for a simple interpretation
 that informs both my sense of discipleship
 and the church's sense of mission,
 while making sense of the critical verses,
 "For to all those who have, more will be given.
 "But from those who have nothing,
 even what they have will be taken away."
 You see, the Kingdom of God
 is another kind of economy altogether,
 an economy governed not by the fear of scarcity,
 but by the thanksgiving of abundance.
 God's economics works the smallest gift
 so abundance increases for the benefit of many.

My way of mapping this parable is to
 stretch it between two poles:
 Abundance and Fear.
 Abundance is at the other end of the scale
 from fear.
 The first two servants illustrate Abundance
 thinking.
 They multiply the master's holdings
 by being willing to take a few chances.
 Entrusted with huge amounts of money,
 they treat it as if it were their own
 (knowing it is not).
 They approach their mission
 with joy and optimism.
 They take prudent risks and receive in return
 the thanks and blessing of the Master.
 That's a working description of FAITH in action.
 But the third servant is an example
 of FEAR in action.
 He digs a hole in the back yard,
 stashes the cash in a coffee can, and waits.
 The original audience would have applauded.
 They would have made the third guy into a hero.
 Rabbis thought it was prudent
 (especially since Torah forbids earning interest)
 to bury property left in one's keeping.
 To bury prevented the deposit from getting stolen
 in the chaotic world of those times.
 Histories of the time-of Matthew (70 ad) describe
 how the Romans, after destroying Jerusalem,
 recovered much of that city's wealth from places
 where Jews had buried it in the ground.
 We learn later that the third servant is afraid of
 his master's hot-temper, not robbers or thieves.
 Yet the third servant himself seems less than honest.

If he truly had believed what he says about the master being harsh and demanding, he would have at least earned some interest. The servant fails to live up to even the low level of trust the Master places in him. The Master reacts to the third servant with venom: "You wicked and lazy servant." (It could also be translated, "Worthless and timid.") And then he punishes the servant. Instead of letting him keep the money, like the other two, he gives the one talent to the servant who took the most risk, the one who turned 5 talents into 10. Not since Job has a good man received such harsh treatment. When we stop to consider the places in our lives where we are fearful of God, lacking faith, we find places that are stagnant, not growing. This is as true for the church as it is for individual lives. The desire to safeguard what God has given can inhibit growth. When the Lord returns, he does not want to hear his followers declare, "Look, everything is just as it was when you left!" Growth requires change, change involves risk, and risk requires faith. (Mark Allan Powell) A church that lives in fear of closing for lack of growth in membership, does not realize its sense of divine mission. The church is given stewardship of the Gospel, for who knows how long. In church conversations around, say, abortion, or stem-cell research, or same-sex relationships, we hear liberal abundance confronting fear. But turn to the gospels. On every page you will find Jesus living abundantly.

Extravagant feedings. Shameless table fellowship. In-your-face preaching. Wasteful healings. Jesus is our model as stewards of the Gospel. Called to proclaim a gospel of social righteousness in opposition to The Third Reich, a group of German pastors and laity published The Theological Declaration of Barmen in 1934. It has been incorporated into the Presbyterian Constitution as one of our Confessions. *"The church is called in every time and place to find its life in the word of God, Jesus Christ, in faith through the Holy Spirit. Only then can it exhibit the reign of God to the world. Only then can it promote the righteousness of God within society."* Barmen is a ringing endorsement of spiritual abundance, not fear. To Whom Much Is Given, Much is Expected. Where do we see ourselves? – advocating abundance or cowering in fear? Let me try my hand at telling the parable a new way: Instead of money, suppose the master gives the servants churches. To one he gives a 1000-member church; to another, a 400-member church; and to the third, based on ability to handle it, a 100-member church. Later the master returns, demanding an accounting of what each church has yielded. The 1000-member church is now 2000 strong; it's called God's Will Mart. The 400-member, now 800, is called E-Pray. "Well done, my good and faithful servants," says the master. "Trustworthy as stewards of a few things, I entrust you with many. Enter my joy."

But the 100 members of the smallest church
 all died and were buried before they could
 increase the gospel by even one believer.
 To the third servant, the master thunders:
 "You timid, worthless trustee!
 You knew how I do business.
 At least you could have turned your church
 over to Southern Baptists,
 so I could hear some good singing.
 "You have buried my gospel! Be gone.
 Join the astrologers and pyramid worshipers."
 Angry and disappointed,
 the master gives the empty shell of that church
 to Will-Mart, for a Christian Family Center.
 So in what manner are we, a local congregation,
 going to promote justice and mercy in the world?
 Is our spiritual wealth in a coffee can?
 Or multiplying in a free and wide-open
 mission field?
 We are not a mass-market church.
 But we have wide choices and great access.
 To the scarcity and fear in our world
 we can offer from our abundance.
 I pray that this body of Christ
 will be those servants who go out and invest
 the resources they're given.
 God doesn't want us to conserve
 the blessings God has given us,
 but to grow them and share them.
 We are not to receive the Gospel to bury it,
 but to take it to the marketplace.
 Abundance or fear?
 Jesus couldn't be any clearer in this gospel lesson.
 The faithless choice of individuals – and churches –
 to opt for self-protection,
 holding the gifts of God in timid reserve.
 To Whom Much Is Given, much is expected.

Let's review where we've been.
 Often when this text is preached,
 it's about stewardship.
 Make the most of the gifts God gives you.
 "You will have to account for your use of God's gifts
 and you will be rewarded or punished accordingly."
 That plays neatly into the gospel of capitalism.
 It meshes with get-what-you-deserve justice.
 It favors an American style of self-reliance
 and perpetual self-improvement.
 But stewardship is more closely related to
 what God has already given us
 than with what God will do with us.
 This parable is about Judgment Day,
 when the Master returns.
 When the Lord returns,
 he does not want to hear his followers declare,
 "Look, everything is just as it was
 when you left!"
 Which servant will you be?
 I don't know about you,
 but I'm not willing to stand before Christ
 on Judgment Day and say,
 "I was afraid to live the Gospel,
 so I hid it in the ground."
 Do I hear an Amen to that? Amen.