

“Trustworthiness”  
Matthew 25: 14-30  
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Another tough parable from Jesus... When do we get to the fun Christmas-y scriptures, anyway? If you're like me, this is another one of those passages that kind of rubs you the wrong way. It doesn't really see fair, does it? I remember when I first heard this parable as a kid and really having a hard time with it. First of all, I thought that the third slave was the smartest one for keeping that coin safe and sound. A talent, was worth quite a bit of money. More than fifteen years' wages for the average laborer. And though burying a coin may sound odd to us, for those hearing the parable in First Century Palestine, it wouldn't seem at all out of the ordinary. Burying money was something people did. It was considered a good security measure. Not to mention, as the parable is told, the master doesn't tell the slaves what to do with the money so how can he get angry at the one who didn't read his mind and know what to do? At least he didn't go out and spend the money in the manner of the prodigal son. And then there's the fact that if the gifts were given in accordance to ability, the master knew beforehand not to expect much of the third slave. It seems he's set up to fail and it doesn't seem fair. The third slave acts in fear of the master he perceives to be harsh, making money off the backs of others, money he doesn't earn or deserve. The master's reaction to the third slave seems to prove the slave's point. And if the master is supposed to be God, I don't much care for a representation of God as a harsh, mean master.

Before we go any further, let's get out on the table what this parable is not about. This parable is not, as some televangelists or other preachers from the prosperity gospel movement would assert, literally about God literally making the faithful rich and the unfaithful poor. After all, it's parable and parables aren't literal. So what *is* it about?

Most of us are familiar with the conventional interpretation of this passage, that the talent in the parable—that is the currency—represents our God-given talents and gifts. In fact, linguists attribute this parable as the source of the English word “talent” meaning... well, you know what it means. So the meaning of the parable is that we all have different gifts, different talents. But even though we all have varying talents to varying degrees, we *all* have gifts and God desires us all to utilize our talents, develop and build our gifts for God's sake, for God's glory. John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist church wrote of this parable, ““He that had received one' - made his having fewer talents than others a pretense for not improving any. Went and hid his master's money - Reader, art thou doing the same? Art thou hiding the talent God hath lent thee?”<sup>1</sup> Throughout the ages, the connection has been made between this parable and Jesus' saying about not hiding your light under a bushel—burying your talent is the equivalent of hiding your light under a bushel.

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<sup>1</sup> John Wesley, Wesley's Notes on the Bible ,1703-1791

And that's all very nice. I'd be the last to argue that you should bury your talent or hide your light under a bushel. And yet, the interpretation fails to fully satisfy me. This seems to be the complete opposite of the story of the generous vineyard owner who paid all the workers a day's wage whether they'd worked all day or one hour. Now, in the same gospel, we seem to be hearing the complete opposite. In the midst of the "Occupy" protest, after the recent study showing that over the last thirty years the incomes of those in the top one percent in the US have grown almost three hundred percent while the other ninety-nine percent have hardly increased putting statistical proof to the long held suspicion that the rich keep getting richer while the poor get poorer it's hard not to wonder if maybe Jesus was making an political-economic point when he said, "For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away." Two thousand years later, it's the same old story, same old song and dance. But why would Jesus condone such as system? Jesus, who time after time aligned himself with the poor and the marginalized.

A few years ago, I heard Rick Ufford-Chase, who was at the time the Moderator of General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA) speak on this parable with a fresh interpretation that finally made sense to me. Rick pointed out that, the parable directly before this, like most of Jesus parables about God's Reign, begins explicitly saying, "the kingdom of heaven will be like this..." Directly after this parable, Jesus says, "When the Son of Man comes in his glory..." and goes on to talk about the final judgment saying, "I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink.... Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it for me." Rick's conclusion was that Jesus didn't intend this as parable telling us to be like the first and second slaves. Rather, Jesus was saying this is what the world really is like. The rich get richer, the poor get poorer and the unfortunate soul who speaks truth to power, as did the third slave, gets punished for it, even as Jesus was punished for speaking the truth to power. And yet, recall that also Jesus said, "Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you... on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward will be great in heaven..." Rick's point was that the master didn't represent God or Jesus but an oppressive, unjust system which Jesus was calling his followers to counteract, to overcome the system.

But this interpretation might seem a bit lacking, too. No parable can bear the weight of the entire Gospel. There's not a one-to-one correlation between everything in a parable and everything in the Gospel. Each parable addresses one part of the Gospel. So what part of the Gospel does this parable address? The real purpose of this story incorporates aspects of both of these interpretations. Recall that the Gospels were all written decades after Jesus' death. In the months and years immediately following Jesus' death, resurrection and subsequent ascension into heaven, his followers expected the Second Coming of Christ to happen any day. But the years came and went, and no Second Coming. They expected the Second Coming to happen before they died, and yet, their fellow believers began to die and still no Second Coming. So they needed comfort and they needed direction regarding what to do and how to behave in the meantime while we wait.

As the conventional interpretation asserts, in the meantime, as we wait for the Second Coming, we are to use our talents, not bury them. It's true that if the gifts were given in accordance to ability and the master knew beforehand not to expect much of the third slave, it does seem unfair and yet, if the coins were given in accordance to ability, the third slave was deemed *able* to earn another coin. The first two slaves each doubled their talents. The master didn't say to the second, "why did you not make five more talents as the first did?"

Each slave was expected to do the best with what they had and was not compared to the achievement of others. Notice, the reward is the same for both of the first two servants, and in that respect, it is actually similar to the story of the generous vineyard owner after all. Presumably, they have both done their best. Both the first and the second slaves received the same reward from the master: promise of more responsibility in the future and the invitation to "enter into the joy of [their] master." Likewise, we are all stewards of what God has provided, of what God wants to do. It all belongs to God and we are all temporary stewards. What would it be like for us to double what God has given us?

What can we learn from the third slave? We know that his big mistake is that he buries his talent. But what leads him to do that? Fear and lack of trust. All he does, or more accurately does not do, is motivated by fear. While the master praises the first two slaves for being trustworthy, the third servant lacks trust. The master *trusts* the slaves with the money. The master *trusts* them to take risks. The master *trusts* them to use the time of his absence wisely. But the third slave lacks trust. He does not trust his own ability to deal with the talent and he does not trust his master to be fair. Trust is a two-way street. If trust is broken or lacking in one direction, it breaks down in the other direction, too. Lack of trust leads to fear.

In this parable we learn that being trustworthy and being ready require taking risks. The first two slaves used their time in the master's absence wisely by taking risks. The third slave was not willing to take risks and, ironically, ended up losing out as the result. "Readiness, in this instance, means something more counterintuitive; it means the willingness to take chances with one's holdings during the waiting period....readiness involves risk-taking."<sup>2</sup> Of course, Jesus knows a thing or two about risk. He tells this story just days before his crucifixion, even as the authorities are plotting to get rid of him. And what risks are we called to take? This brings us back to the second interpretation of the parable: we are called to take risks in feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, clothing the naked, speaking the truth to power, aligning ourselves with the poor and the marginalized. We are called to risk persecution on Jesus' account.

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<sup>2</sup> Paul L. Escamilla, "The Unexpected," *Disciplines: A Book of Daily Devotions 2011*, (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 2010), 329.

John Buchanan, pastor of Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago writes:

“The greatest risk of all, it turns out, is not to risk anything, not to care deeply and profoundly enough about anything to invest deeply, to give your heart away and in the process risk everything. The greatest risk of all, it turns out, is to play it safe, to live cautiously and prudently. Orthodox, conventional theology identifies sin as pride and egotism. However, there is an entire other lens through which to view the human condition. It is called sloth, one of the ancient church’s seven deadly sins. Sloth means not caring, not loving, not rejoicing, not living up to the full potential of our humanity, playing it safe, investing nothing, being cautious and prudent, digging a hole and burying the money in the ground.”<sup>3</sup>

Buchanan continues:

“Here Jesus invites us to be his disciples, to live our lives as fully as possible by investing them, by risking, by expanding the horizons of our responsibilities. To be this man or woman, he says is not so much believing ideas about him as it is following him.”<sup>4</sup>

This parable invites us to ask ourselves: do we believe what we say we believe and what do we do about it? Do we trust God to be who we say we believe God is? Do we trust God enough to take faithful risks? What risks are we willing to take to in support of that belief? What are we willing to risk for God? What are we willing to risk for Christ’s church? How are we willing to expand the horizons of our responsibilities?

How will we double the bounty God has given us? For some it may be increasing our tithes. For some it may be increasing our commitment of time and effort to the church. For some, it may be taking more time for prayer and/or Bible study. Whatever “doubling your talent” means to you, risk it. Whatever being trustworthy means to you, risk it. Whatever feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty and aligning yourself with the poor and marginalized means to you, risk it.

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<sup>3</sup> John M. Buchanan, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Volume 4. ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 310.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 312.