

The parable of the talents

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 08 October 2023

Preacher: Emily MacArthur

- [0 : 0 0] Through the storm, he is Lord, Lord of all. We need to really remember that, whatever we're going through, that through the storm, Jesus is there with us.
- Please sit down, and I'm going to invite David now to come and read the powerful of the talents. Good morning, everyone.
- Good morning. I was on a train to Cornwall on Tuesday. I had a phone call from a young man I've known for many years.
- He was telling me that his father had just passed away. That man and his wife, over the years, he passed away.
- He was 85, so he had a good life. But one of the things about him and his wife was that over the years, they had fostered, I think, 217 children.
- [1 : 0 6] 217 children. I was one of those. But I said to him one day, I said, Mike, how did you come to foster, you know, start fostering?
- And he said, well, we just felt that we were doing the Lord's work. Simple as that. But I say that because our story or our parable this morning is about the end times, isn't it?
- Judgment and the last days. I think Mike and his wife, June, invested their bags of gold very, very well, even though I say it myself.
- So let's start. Again, the kingdom of heaven will be like a man going on a journey who called his servants and entrusted his wealth to them.
- To one he gave five bags of gold, to another two bags, and to another one bag, each according to his ability. Then he went on his journey.
- [2 : 1 3] The man who had received five bags of gold went at once and put his money to work and gained five bags more.
- So also, the one with two bags of gold gained two more. But the man who had received one bag went off, dug a hole in the ground, and hid his master's money.
- After a long time, the master of those servants returned and settled accounts with them. The man who had received five bags of gold brought the other five.
- Master, he said, you entrusted me with five bags of gold. See, I have gained five more. His master replied, well done, good and faithful servant.
- You have been faithful with a few things. I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share in your master's happiness. The man with two bags of gold also came.
- [3 : 2 1] Master, he said, you entrusted me with two bags of gold. See, I have gained two more. His master replied, well done, good and faithful servant.
- You have been faithful with a few things. I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share in your master's happiness. Then the man who had received one bag of gold came.
- Master, he said, I knew that you are a hard man, harvesting where you have not sown and gathering where you have not scattered seed.

So I was afraid and went out and hid your gold in the ground. See, here is what belongs to you. His master replied, you wicked, lazy servant.

So you knew that I harvest where I have not sown and gather where I have not scattered seed. Well then, you should have put my money on deposit with the bankers so that when I returned, I would have received it back with interest.

[4 : 36] So take the bag of gold from him and give it to the one who has ten bags. Whoever has will be given more and they will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them.

And throw that worthless servant outside into the darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Amen.

To invite Emily to come before she comes, just like to pray for you, Emily. Lord, we bring Emily before you now. We pray that the words of her mouth will reach our ears and our hearts and that we will be inspired to do your will even more.

We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. So I'm just going to have a microphone. Adjustment for height.

Thanks, Richard. So, the parable of the gold coins, or in my old trusty NIV Bible, this is called the parable of the talents. And I was offered a choice about which parable I was going to speak on today.

[6 : 01] And I actually chose this one. And in the last few weeks, I've been wondering why and whether that was a good idea. Because it's a challenging parable. You might have noticed, David read it to us, that it doesn't end well for one of the servants.

So this is a parable which talks about kingdom opportunities, kingdom blessings, but also kingdom challenges. And it's part of our series looking on how we live in God's kingdom, which is here with us now.

So first of all, I just wanted to talk a little bit about what I think the difficult things are about this parable. So firstly, and I think this is maybe particularly, you might feel this if you're brought up in a family with more than one child.

There is an unequal distribution of the talents. It feels unfair, doesn't it? Particularly as the one who receives least actually gets the worst outcome in the story.

I feel that somewhere there's a parent saying, well, life is unfair. But somehow in the kingdom of God, that's maybe what we don't expect. So that's one of the challenges I'm going to talk about.

[7 : 19] Secondly, there's the punishment that the third servant gets for maybe seeming to do nothing. Or doing nothing out of fear. And thirdly, that same servant has that attack on the conduct of the master.

And certainly in these parables, the understanding is that we see the master as representing God or Jesus. So I think that's another thing that at first strikes us as a bit problematic.

But I was really encouraged by Alex's reminder a few weeks ago when she was talking about the mustard seed. That the truth in these parables isn't always obvious. We don't always see it at the first reading.

It takes time and patience to uncover. And certainly this is a parable that I've known, I think, most of my life. Certainly as long as I can remember.

And over the years, I've seen different things. So I guess there's an encouragement for you to just keep looking, keep listening, keep your ears open to what God might be saying about this parable.

[8 : 26] I'd love to hear your thoughts on it. So, it's a story about a master returning to his estate after a period of absence.

And as David said, when we look at it today, we think of, I think of the second coming, don't we? We think of Jesus coming back. We think of those end time conversations that we might have with Jesus when he might reward us for the faithful service that we have done.

And after all, it does follow in Matthew 25 from the parable of the ten bridesmaids. Remember them with their lamps of oil waiting for the return of the bridegroom.

But I think it's also a parable about how to live in God's kingdom. Because at the time that Jesus was talking about this parable, that kingdom was really close at hand.

So Jesus tells this story to his disciples in Matthew 25. Matthew 25, Jesus has entered Jerusalem for the final time.

[9 : 39] He's about to face the cross. He's set his face to the cross. He's about two days away from it. And Matthew 25 contains his last bit of teaching in Matthew's gospel to his disciples.

And I get a sense of urgency from it. I get a sense that this is his final instructions to disciples who are going to carry out the work of the kingdom of God as he inherits his kingdom, as Jesus inherits his kingdom.

So perhaps the importance of this parable is not just that the master is coming back, but he's soon leaving.

In the version in Luke's gospel, the king is going to take possession of his kingdom, just like Jesus is about to do. The disciples are going to take on some of this kingdom work, and there is much work to be done.

So I was slightly thrown by the bags of gold, as I said, because I know this as the parable of the talents.

[10 : 46] But I think bags of gold is a really good translation. The talent is a sum of money. And we're perhaps not familiar with it, seeing the talent in the Bible, because it is a really, really big sum of money.

Biblical scholars think it was equivalent to 6,000 denarii. We often hear denarii used in the gospels. And one denarius was thought to be the sum of money earned by an average man in one day.

So hopefully the math stands up. But one talent is worth 20 years wages for an average person. And five talents, the sum given to the first servant, is 100 years wages for an average person.

Now, I don't want to get hung up on exactly how much this is worth, because, of course, it's a parable. It's a story. Jesus tells us it, and the items in it represent other things.

But I wanted to make this point, because I think it is significant that all three servants are given an extraordinary amount of money. For the first servant, who has five talents, he receives more money than he could hope to earn in a lifetime.

[12 : 09] And even for the other two servants, it's a life-changing amount of money that is given. I grew up thinking, and I think being taught, that this is a passage about spiritual gifting.

But I think the slight problem with just seeing the parables as representing the talents as representing spiritual gifts, is I think for many years I thought, well, I can just use my spiritual gifts.

I need to put those to work in God's kingdom. And maybe I can keep some of the rest back. Maybe I don't need to think about using my money in God's kingdom. Maybe I don't need to think about using my time or my natural ability.

I think this story is about investing everything we have in God's kingdom, in acknowledgement that it is all generously given to us by God.

And I did discover something nice, that the English word talent, it's a medieval English word, became part of the English language because of this parable.

[13 : 14] So that's where we get our word talent from. So I think every time you say that someone is talented, you may be in a small way acknowledging that all our talents and abilities are gifted to us from God.

So I'm going to take the talent in this passage to represent everything that God has given us. The gifts of our lives, our money, our health, our talents, and our spiritual gifting.

And also, I think it represents the opportunities God gives us to serve in his kingdom. And this isn't a story about investing wealth for individual benefit.

In the parable, the servants steward the wealth rather than benefit from it. Jesus isn't giving a financial investment seminar. He doesn't have material wealth.

And the disciples that he is speaking to won't gain material wealth for themselves. In fact, many of them are going to be martyred for their faith. This is a parable about investing for eternal outcomes.

[14 : 22] Lives changed and people saved. So we're going to have a look at what happens to the three servants.

And just to confuse you, I'm going to do it in reverse order. So I'm going to take the third servant first. And he's the one who is given one talent. And when the master returns, he has the same one talent remaining.

And as I said earlier, it might seem that the treatment of this servant feels a bit unfair. After all, he doesn't lose the talent.

And the result is that when the master returns, nothing has changed. But the master wants growth. And Jesus wants kingdom growth. He doesn't want stagnation.

He wants us to put our blessings to work so that the kingdom of God will increase. And actually, it's not true that the first servant does nothing.

[15 : 23] Instead, what he does is he buries the talent that he has. Why would he do that? Well, you might bury something to keep it safe.

But you also bury something so no one else can find it. The third servant knows where the talent is hidden. He knows that if he needs it, he can dig it up again.

But by burying it, he prevents anyone else getting the benefit of it. No one else knows that it's there. If he'd invested it, if he'd put it in a bank, as the master says, when he returns, it would have been invested in other work and bought an increased kingdom return.

So the third servant says that he buries the talent out of fear. I knew that you were a hard man, harvesting where you have not sown and gathered where you have not scattered seed.

So I was afraid and went out and hid your talent in the ground. See, here is what belongs to you. So he says he's afraid of the master, as he depicts as tyrannical.

[16 : 41] But somehow I don't quite buy it. I don't think it sounds like a speech of a man who is fearful. It's an attack on the master's integrity.

He accuses the master of being a hard man and taking grain from other people. But then the act of the servant burying the money seems an odd choice.

After all, he could have invested it, that it might have provided grain for many. It feels a bit like an act of deflection. It feels to me like the first servant receives one talent and is so annoyed and bitter that he didn't have more, that he keeps it to himself out of resentment.

We know that the master has been away for a long time. And I wonder what the third servant has been doing in his absence, not diligently working for the kingdom.

As the master's rebuke of this third servant confirms, you lazy servant. And the punishment for the third servant is severe.

[17 : 51] He's thrown outside into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. This is the punishment in store for the person who receives kingdom blessing and does absolutely nothing with it.

The third servant reminds us of the danger of being resentful, of not showing gratitude for what we have been given, of taking what we can get and holding onto it with a tight fist, hidden away so that no one else can benefit.

So what about the second servant? So the second servant is the one who gets two talents.

He invests all of them, and at the end he gets four. He has four talents when the master returns, so he doubles his investment. But we need to look at this in comparison with the first servant, who at the end gets ten talents, so it's not as many.

It's what I think of as a small and steady return. I like to think of the second servant as the person who has never been on the stage at Spring Harvest, who doesn't have their own Christian podcast, who is perhaps not in any leadership role at all.

[19 : 13] The second servant is the person who calls people who are missing from church on Sunday. They fill up church rotas. They have never been on a mission trip, but they look after the vulnerable in their community.

They haven't brought hundreds of people to Christ, but they have discipled a few people faithfully. In fact, the slow, unnoticed, but relentless increase of the kingdom is in many ways due to the faithfulness of second servants.

They are faithful in all the small things, and the work of the kingdom of God is safe in their hands. George Eliot, the great novelist of English life, describes this faithfulness in her novel Middlemarch.

For the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts, and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life and rest in unvisited graves.

But the encouragement of this passage is that hidden work of the second servant is both noticed and rewarded by the master, and Jesus takes pains to show that the second servant gets exactly the same reward as the first.

[20 : 50] The reward, as it's written in Matthew's Gospel, you will have noticed is word for word the same. Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful with a few things.

I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness. So what about servant number one?

So this is the servant who has five talents. He invests all of them, and at the end he has ten remaining. When I first looked at the story of this servant, it felt a bit reckless or unmeasured to invest all five.

Like the child who gets five pounds pocket money for Christmas and spends all of it at once. In fact, I was having a discussion with one of my daughters earlier in the summer.

She wanted to take a risk about something, and I wanted her to play it safe. After I had argued my point, she said to me, I feel, Mum, like I have a pound in my hand.

[22 : 03] I could keep it and still have a pound, or I could use it to try and get ten pounds. So at this point I called Gamblers Anonymous, although I didn't, because I knew I was preaching on this parable, and it rang a bell.

So instead I'd been thinking about this. I'd been thinking about that childlike desire to invest everything, to throw everything at the wall in hope that they will get something more than what they have already.

After all, Jesus said earlier in Matthew's Gospel, in Matthew 18, that unless you become like little children, you won't enter the kingdom of heaven.

As we get older, we like our own way. It's pride, isn't it, that is the assertion of our way over God's way. As we get older, we think about ourselves, our own needs, and we sometimes believe they are more important than God's kingdom.

I love John Wimber's idea of God's kingdom, which is where everyone gets to play. I'm not suggesting that we take unnecessary risks, but when God invites us on an adventure, let's not miss out.

[23 : 23] Sometimes living the kingdom way is about desiring and praying that we might see more, more fruit, more life saved, more lives changed.

Let's not be satisfied with the little or what we have already. Investing all five talents is not about being happy to make only one, but a desire to make ten.

So did holding on to the pound, as I'd wanted to do, have more in common with the behaviour of the first servant or the third?

Sometimes, if I'm honest, I feel like the servant who has five talents and invests half of them, because two and a half is good, right? After all, it's more than I would have invested if I'd just been given two.

And actually, when me and Rob were away at Spring Harvest earlier this year, we really felt challenged, particularly about our financial giving. We realised that when we were younger and had less money than we do now, that we often gave it generously to people in need.

[24 : 37] We had two talents and invested two. Now we have more money and therefore, the quantity of the value we give away is greater than we were younger.

But maybe, along the way, we had lost some of our spirit of generosity. We realised that we had become half-hearted kingdom workers.

We had kept more back for ourselves and become fearful of future risks. God doesn't want half-heartedness. In Revelation, he says he will spit the lukewarm out of his mouth.

So the word I have for this third servant is whole-heartedness. They know they have been given much and they invest all of it in kingdom work.

They are whole-hearted in giving their money, their time, their gifting, and their natural abilities. They are not just doing kingdom work on Sundays.

[25 : 37] They are doing it all the time, wherever they are, whatever they are doing. And they are doing it with all that they have. So how do you get to play with five talents?

Well, you first need to be faithful with one and after that, you need to be faithful with two. The distribution of talents in this parable is not unfair.

It is based on past faithfulness. If you can show that you are faithful with five talents, what kingdom riches await you? As the master says, you have been faithful with a few things.

I will put you in charge of many things. And I think having five talents can be a very precarious position if our hearts aren't in the right place.

I've been reading in the news, and maybe you have, stories of Christian celebrities who have been given five talents and they haven't been able to shoulder the responsibility.

[26 : 40] Instead, they have kept power for themselves and they have taken power from people who should have been able to reap the blessings of God's kingdom. This kind of blessing is a huge responsibility.

Steward it wisely. It's from another of Jesus' stories of a faithful servant, this time in Luke 12, that we get the inspiration for Uncle Ben's famous advice to Spider-Man.

With great power comes great responsibility. And we think that was inspired from Luke 12, from everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded.

And from the one who is entrusted much, much more will be asked. No one gets to play with five talents unless they have been faithful with two talents.

No one gets to be faithful with two talents if they haven't been grateful for the one. So who does God need to build his kingdom?

[27 : 48] He wants wholehearted people that want to work hard and long to see the kingdom of God grow and increase. God wants faithful people called to hidden acts of kingdom service.

He doesn't want ungrateful servants keeping kingdom treasure for themselves, keeping it hidden so no one else can benefit. So be faithful in the small things, be wholehearted in the big things and be grateful for all things.

Thank you.