

## **We Have Everything We Need**

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Matthew 25: 14-30

Well, we have here another challenging parable. Nothing new. Jesus told lots of those! But, I have to confess that for many years I have preached the meaning of this parable to be something along the lines of: God is a generous, prodigal, risk-taking (when it comes to grace) God. And in that way God gives us all these gifts and resources and expects us to be just as generous and risk-taking for the sake of Christ, with those resources entrusted to us. To do that is to be joyful, and not to do that, out of some fear that we won't have enough, is finally to live in a hell of our own making.

And, sometimes I even might have preached that same message with an emphasis on *our* talents and expending them prodigally for Christ, although I shouldn't have. It's really a rather unfortunate translation of the Greek word used here. Because a "talent" was definitely a unit of measure of money. Period. In fact, it was the largest unit of measure for money. So, it might better be translated as "a large pot of gold!" But, I have to admit that today when we are talking about the stewardship of our talents, it's especially tempting to go there. Now, don't get me wrong, there's nothing wrong with that interpretation of this parable. Who knows, I may go back to it sometime. It's a good message and even though it is counter-intuitive to the way we often are, it is in harmony with the gospel. I mean that's hard enough, isn't it, to be as risk-taking with what God has given us as God is?

But, for now I've come to believe that this parable is even more counter-cultural than even that! It involves the crazy notion that what we have already, right now, as individuals, as a church, as communities, that what we've been given, and what we gain simply from the fruits of our labors is enough. It's sufficient for life in the Kingdom of God! So, hang with me. The first thing we have to do for this parable to open up for us is to stop reading it as an allegory, where everything is supposed to stand for something else. The first thing we see when we stop reading it as an allegory is that the master is NOT to be seen as God. No, you see this master doesn't act in the way that Jesus in other places in Matthew specifically taught that God acted. You know, with mercy, bringing the blessing of sun and rain for both the good and the evil, the just and the unjust, loving even lazy sinners and enemies?

No, this master like the master in several of Jesus' other parables seems to be more like the despised absentee landlords that were somewhat common in Palestine at the time. These were rich landowners who did no work themselves, but simply made money off the backs of and at the expense of others, namely their poor slaves. They were people who, indeed, reaped where they did not sow and gathered where they had not scattered seed. From the perspective of common peasants who did actual sowing and reaping, harsh men indeed. Now, you might say, "ah, but in the parable this master looks very generous." Just look at the large sums he entrusts to his slaves! But, I would say to you it is not generosity. It is simply the way he wants to continue to make money off his money, by the efforts of others. Jesus says, he entrusted them these sums according to their "abilities." He wants and expects these slaves to buy into his same agenda of "more, more, more." "More is better."

Two of them do. And these two enter into the "joy" of who has indeed become their master... the "joy" of this man, which is the "joy" of material goods. But, Jesus, you remember has said, "you can't serve God and money." That would be to have two masters. They have entered into the joy of *their* master, but that master is not God. No, I think Jesus has diagnosed the problem he wants to talk about in this parable and has put it in the mouth of this master when he says: "For 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." "The rich get richer and the poor get poorer, and that's just the way it works, and can I help it if I'm rich?"

You see, this master seems the most angry at the third servant because he, at least, should have taken his money and invested it with a banker and gotten interest! (You notice that he doesn't anywhere deny that he reaps where he doesn't sow, he's just mad at the third slave for not doing the same thing, reaping where he hasn't sown, which, of course, is what interest does.) Now, I like getting what little bit of interest I sometimes get on investments. So, I don't want to go into a whole thing about interest. Except to say that the context of this parable is Jewish law, which specifically forbade loaning money at interest. It was seen as taking advantage of the poor, taking advantage of people who needed a loan. And in the parable, gain from interest is at least implied in what the other two slaves did to double the master's money, "trading" with it.

So, without getting into a whole thing about interest, per se, we do know something about loan sharks, don't we, and something about lenders lending money at interest rates they know the people before them can't afford. So the problem Jesus addresses in this parable is that because of *sin*, the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. It is still a problem. At least, it should be for us who have been claimed by Jesus as his people. In our very individualistic society, we know that it's not a problem for a lot of people. A lot of people just seem to think that their money is just theirs, and God's grace had nothing to do with anything in their life and everyone's free to work hard and make a good life for themselves and that's enough.

And I guess a lot of times you and I are tempted to think that way. But, as Christians we know that a community isn't judged by the amount of its riches. It's judged by how it cares for the last and the least in its midst: If you've done it to the least of these, which is the teaching of Jesus that follows directly on the heels of this parable. So, maybe the real question Jesus would have us wrestle with is: what can free us from our desire for more? What can free us for instead, desiring and cherishing what we have? You know, in a "bull" market, it's easy to tell ourselves who we are. "Look at me; I doubled what I started with." "I'm successful and know how to make good money!" But, in a "bear" market, it feels bankrupt inside us. It's not so easy to feel good about ourselves.

But, should it be that way? Is that really the way we have defined ourselves? What can free us from our desire for more? What can free us for instead, desiring and cherishing what we have? I think Jesus would say that if we can get *there*, we will be embodying the Kingdom and the problem of the poor getting poorer will no longer be a problem. It was Dwight Moody who said, "If you don't have much, but give, you will have more. But if you don't give, whatever you have will never be enough." You see, that's an insight firmly grounded in a Judeo-Christian worldview that understands that what's given us in creation is a limited, but sufficient, even super-abundant good.

It's that worldview that's behind Jesus' parable. It's Genesis, chapters one through three! God is creating all things, and with each thing, you remember, God looks and sees that it's good, indeed very, very good. But, there are *limits* to creation which is what is symbolized by the tree God tells the humans they can't eat from. There are limits in this *good* and *sufficient* creation. It's *not* a world where *unlimited* gain and *endless* profit is possible. That may seem foreign to a lot of our thinking. But, you remember, that is the human temptation spoken of in Genesis, to pridefully say, "I want it all." "Forget the limits, I don't trust the limits, I might *not* get enough, so I will take what I want."

See, in the parable, the master's money is a good and sufficient gift for life in the kingdom. It's enough to provide a good life for him and for all who work for him and for countless others. But, no he wants more for himself, and he thinks his slaves should buy into that agenda as well. Life's about getting more, more, more. I think the 3<sup>rd</sup> slave in the parable is not the goat at all, he's the hero! He knows how to be content with his life. He is, as he says of himself, afraid. But, he's not afraid of what will happen to him at the hands of the master. He's afraid of

becoming *like* the master, a harsh man who reaps where he didn't sow. He's the hero because he fears God more than he fears the threat of life's insufficiency, a threat wielded by this master and his greed. He's the hero because he is unafraid to name greed as greed, and suffer the judgment of the world for telling the truth. In fact, if anything, I think Matthew would have us see the third slave as Jesus, the one judged worthless by the agendas of the world and thrown into the outer darkness by that world, crucified in shame.

Friends, here's what Jesus is saying: We don't have to buy into the quest to get rich. We don't have to buy into the perspective that "more is better." As a good friend of mine says: More than everything, is *less*. And we *have* everything we need. The gospel of Jesus Christ says *that* world of endless striving for more, *that* world of never being satisfied with the gifts of life, that world is passing away! And in the world Christ is bringing, even now, every day if we don't miss it, we are set free! We are set free for life, for a life to be cherished and freely shared with and for the sake of each other because we know in the resurrection of our Lord that even the threat of death has no power over us! We can trust that! The work of the Kingdom lies ahead. Let us enter into it freely and unafraid.

Amen.