

26 June 2016

Ways to Look at Talents
Matthew 25:14-30

So three pastors walk into a bar. The first one is the founding pastor of a large, growing suburban evangelical church – the sort that has a high-tech “worship center” instead of a sanctuary, a separate Sunday program for children, and four acres of parking lot. The second one’s the pastor of a liberal mainline church – the kind that has a Main Street entrance that nobody uses, a Head Start program on the main floor, a soup kitchen in the basement, and more organ pipes than worshippers on Sunday. The third pastor’s visiting from overseas, an Anglican priest from a small congregation in Botswana.

The bartender comes over to serve them, and it’s Jesus of Nazareth, and after giving them their drinks – Coke, pinot noir, and ice water respectively – he says, “It’s good to see you three together. Let me tell you a story.

“A rich landowner went on a journey, leaving his property in the charge of his servants. He called three of them over to him. One was a bright, ambitious man, and he gave that one five gold talents. The second was a solid, dependable man, and he gave him two gold talents. The last was a nervous sort, and to him the rich man gave only one gold talent. Then he went on his journey. At once the ambitious servant with five talents went to the market and began buying and trading and dealing. He was clever and lucky, and he managed to make five more talents. The second man did the same, and managed to double his two talents. The third servant went and buried his talent where it was safe.

“When the rich man came back, the three servants presented themselves to him. When he saw that the first had doubled his five talents, he praised him, ‘Well done! I see I can trust you with even more now!’ When the second brought him his four talents, he praised him as well: ‘Well done! I see I can trust you with even more now!’ But when the third came bringing only the talent he had been given, the master was angry. ‘What? You didn’t even put it in the bank to earn interest?’ The servant stammered, ‘I was afraid, master. I knew you were harsh and demanding, and I didn’t want to risk losing any of your money.’

“The master snatched the one talent from the man’s hand, gave it to the one who had ten talents. and snapped, ‘Get this man out of my sight! Throw him out!’”

Jesus smiled and said, “Now, I’ll let each of you decide what the story means,” and went down the bar to polish some glasses.

The evangelical pastor from the growing church said, “Well, it’s obvious what it means. In fact, I preached from this story just last month. It shows us that God expects us to succeed. He has given us the gifts, talents, and resources that we need, and he expects us to use them to build his kingdom. The more we succeed, the more pleased God is, and the more he blesses us. I’ve seen it in my own church. You know, we started in a middle school auditorium with just a few people. We had to move in our screens and sound system and children’s classrooms every Sunday morning and then back out after the service. But we never lost sight of our dream to

grow. We used the internet, mass mailings, and old-fashioned legwork, and slowly we began to see God's blessing. Now we worship three thousand people and have a staff of twenty-two. God has blessed us and is still blessing us. We have stepped out in faith and are returning to our master a hundred times as many people as he gave us.

"It's so obvious. Why would God be content with failure? Of course he wants us to succeed! And the churches that succeed most will be rewarded. That's what it means when the master takes the one talent away from that poor slob who was too afraid to step out on faith and gives it to the one who had earned the most. That's what the story means: God wants us to succeed, and he will bless those who take that seriously."

The mainline pastor looked pained and said, "I think you're missing an important point, though. You seem to think that success is all about numbers, but even the story shows that that isn't true. The man who started with five talents earned another five, and the one who started with two earned another two. *But the master praised them both with exactly the same words.* It's not about how much we produce in raw numbers but what we do with what we've been given. And that isn't always quantifiable.

"Take a look at the church I serve. We were once like you, the "In" church – the classy downtown church. But our neighborhood changed, and our members changed with it. Now the need around us is for physical assistance, and our members have taken that need to heart. We have more members active in service and ministry and social justice than anywhere I've ever served. The poor people in our neighborhood know that they are safe with us, that we care. God hasn't just given us talents but also a mission field, and he (or she) has given us the passion to serve in it. We may not have as many members, and we may not be growing in numbers, and we may not have enough money to fix the roof over the old education wing, but we are still building the kingdom of God, still being faithful with the talents she (or he) has given us.

"But I do agree with you that the worst mistake we could make would be to do what the frightened servant did, and bury our talents, hiding both from God's gifts and others' need. God may not expect all of us to be on the way to becoming megachurches, but he (or she) does expect us to be faithful with what we've been given."

The African priest had listened to both of them closely as they explained Jesus' story. Now, as the mainline pastor finished, the African priest said quietly, "I wonder why you gentlemen are both so sure that the landowner in the story represents God. It is true that sometimes the landowner in Jesus' stories is obviously supposed to be God, but not always. And I'm not so sure in this one. You see, in my country, Botswana, we know something about absent landowners, but we do not admire them. For many years all the good land in Botswana belonged to the British, and we served them. They chose some of our children to be their civil servants, and put them over their brothers. And the more these chosen ones produced for the British, the more the British let them keep for themselves, so that a few became wealthy. This, as you might expect, made them loyal to the British instead of to their own people.

"I do not mean to say that this landowner in Jesus' story is a colonial master. But I hope you understand why my people do not immediately assume that the master in this story is God.

He looks too much like something else, something we are too familiar with. Especially when he plays the servants against one another, putting them in competition for his approval. We find this disturbing. This is not how we are taught to relate to each other. And when the master takes the one talent that the fearful man has and gives it to the richest servant of all, we grow angry. This does not seem like God, who loves the oppressed, who comforts the frightened.

“I, too, have preached this story to my flock in Botswana. Do you want to know what everyone asks me after hearing the story? They ask, ‘Why was it a contest?’ To their minds, this is a terrible story about a greedy landlord, and selfish, competing servants, and one frightened man who was punished for no good reason. Nobody wins in this story. Here is what they ask me: ‘The one who had earned five talents, why did he not go back to help the one who was afraid? He could have taken him to the market and shown him how to use his talent to support his family. Why didn’t the successful man help his brother?’

“That’s what the Botswana Christians want to know. And I tell them, ‘Perhaps that is the question Jesus wants us to ask.’”

Then all three pastors looked down the bar at Jesus, but he only smiled and continued polishing the glasses.

We read from Matthew 25:14-30:

‘For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master’s money. After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, “Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents.” His master said to him, “Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.” And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, “Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents.” His master said to him, “Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.” Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, “Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.” But his master replied, “You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. 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. As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

Here's the thing about parables – really about all stories. They are too big to have just one meaning. Today you heard three different interpretations of the Parable of the Talents. And I think all of them work. None of them work for every person or in every context, but the story supports more than one understanding. I didn't invent any of these interpretations. You may not have heard the one from Africa, but the question "Why didn't the successful man help his brother?" is a question that Africans ask upon hearing this story. And maybe it resonates with you as well. You see, the question we should ask ourselves when we hear a parable is not, "What does that *mean*?" but rather, "What is God saying to me in this story?"