

# The Parable of the Talents

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Matthew 25:14-20

Sermon Series: The Kingdom of God

*“Son, being overcautious is a terrible way to live.”*

Once upon a time, there was a wealthy stockbroker who made a tidy profit on the stock market. He traveled the world over in search of more investments. As he prepared for a trip to investigate new business ventures, he called his associates together, presenting them with his portfolio to manage in his absence.

This stockbroker, being a shrewd man, knows his associates have varying abilities, so he distributes talents to each. To one he gives five talents, to the second he gives two talents and to the third he gives one talent.

His first associate immediately invests in the Jerusalem Stock Exchange. Lo and behold, the commodities market goes through the ceiling and, in no time, doubles the investment. The second associate is equally successful. She invests in the pork bellies market at just the right time, yielding a 100 percent rate of return. The third associate is overly cautious about investing the boss's money. He places it in a safe deposit box, where the investment remains, safe and sound.

After a long absence, the stockbroker returns and calls his associates together. The first two associates eagerly report a positive Return on Investment. They announce earnings of five on top

of five and two on top of two. “Well done, good and faithful associates. You have achieved a higher rate of return than the fair market value. Come, be partners in my firm.”

The third associate, now on the defensive, attempts to justify his conservative investment strategy. “Sir, I know you're a hard-driving businessman. I was afraid of speculating with your investment, so I locked it away in a safe deposit box. But here, sir, is your one talent, on time and in full.”

“If you took me for a hard-driving businessman,” the stockbroker said, “why didn't you at least invest in an interest-bearing savings account, yielding three and a quarter percent, insured by the FDIC? I never asked you to make money for me, I asked you to do business with me. You could have taken a few risks with my money, but, no, you decided instead to play it safe. And now you have the audacity to come crawling back to me with this song and dance that I can't be trusted. Son, being overcautious is a terrible way to live.

“I'll tell you what I'm going to do. I'm going to take what you have and give it to my new business partners. You don't like this sort of arrangement, do you? Well then, let my new business partners show you the door.”

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On the surface, Jesus' parables seem like simple stories. Don't be fooled! They can be real brain teasers.

Three questions come to mind as I read this parable. First question: What's the big crime of burying the master's money in the ground? Burying money was a common way of protecting valuables in the ancient world. This one talent servant doesn't do anything wrong. He pays his master back in full.

But this one talent servant totally misinterprets his master's intentions. We read in verse 14 that the master entrusts his assets to three servants. He doesn't place restrictions on them. He trusts them to do the right thing. Yet, this one talent servant presumes their relationship is based on fear, not trust. He says in verse 25, "I was afraid, so I hid your talent in the ground." He decides it's better to be afraid of his master than to trust him. He regards his boss as some sort of bean counter who is interested only in the bottom line. God, like the master in this parable, intends our relationship to be based on faith, not fear.

Second question: What would have happened had this one talent servant invested his master's money and lost everything? Suppose this servant had said to his master, "I invested your money in blue-chip, high-end stocks, but the market went south, as did your investment?" I'm convinced this master would have acknowledged him for trying. Notice which servant is punished in this parable?

It's the servant who wouldn't try. God forbid that we would become play-it-safe Christians who congregate in play-it-safe churches.

Third question: Why do the rich become richer and the poor become poorer in this parable? This story reads like an inverted Robin Hood tale. Jesus takes from the poor to give to the rich. Rewarding ten talent servants with more talents, while zeroing out the assets of this one talent servant, seems so unfair.

Jesus illustrates in this parable the natural law of degeneration. It's the use-or-lose principle played out in real life. If you don't use your muscles, they atrophy. If you don't stimulate your mind, you lose mental capacity. If you don't use your talents, you lose them.

Our English word "talent" derives from this parable. We commonly associate people's talents with their natural abilities. This parable is not a lesson on being the best that we can be, even though our culture of achievement desperately wants it to be so!

A talent in this parable is clearly a unit of money. This money, in the final analysis, doesn't belong to the servants, it belongs to the master. Our talents are simply on loan to us for awhile.

God doesn't expect identical results from people of varying resources. We are not given identical resources to invest in the kingdom. The servant with five talents is not judged alongside the servant with two talents; neither is the servant with two talents compared to the servant with one talent. God doesn't hold us accountable

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relative to other people's resources. We are judged solely by what we do with the talents God has given us.

The early Hassidic sage Rabbi Zusya once said, "In the world to come, God will not ask me, 'Why were you not more like Moses?' Instead he will ask, 'Why were you not more like Zusya?'"

You may feel as though you're only a one talent servant. Don't confuse size with value. One talent resources multiply in the kingdom of God.

This parable has considerable import for what we're doing here today. The past decade has been monumental for this church. We have united around a single, compelling vision. Disciple-making is the term we use to describe this vision. We seek to be disciples and to make disciples for Jesus Christ.

Our call-equip-send mission is how we fulfill this disciple-making vision. We endeavor to be a church that calls people to faith, equips people for discipleship and sends people forth to love and serve the world.

Buildings are simply tools to help us accomplish this call-equip-send mission. The only building left standing after the last decade of construction is our 1874 chapel. Over the past decade, we have constructed an 1100 seat sanctuary, added a parking lot and built a 55,000 square foot Ministry Center. We have planted two churches in Loudoun County to complement the church in Centre-

ville launched in the 1980s. We take seriously our calling to become a teaching church for our flagging denomination.

If you've invested your time and money in this disciple-making vision in the past decade, you've made a good (ROI) Return on Investment!

This call-equip-send mission hasn't succeeded on our own efforts alone. We stand on the shoulders of those who have preceded us. We're not only investing in the future, we're keeping faith with the past. I invite you to stand for a moment. If you've come to this church since we began worshipping in this sanctuary, please sit down. If you came to this church in the 1990s, when we worshipped in the former sanctuary, you can sit down. If you came to this church in the '80s, you can sit down. If you came in the '70s, you can sit down. Those still standing were active in our church during the inaugural decade of our former sanctuary. If you came to this church in the '60s you can sit down. Those among us who remain standing date back to a time when Vienna Presbyterian Church was a chapel at the corner of Church and Mill Streets. Talk about embracing change! Since we can't pay you back, our pledge is to pay you forward. We'll give our five talents, two talents and one talent. Remember what we've said in previous campaigns: "Not equal gifts, but equal sacrifice."

Ever since I came to this church 29 years ago, I've had this distinct sense that God's hand is upon this

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congregation. God has a greater vision for this church than what we've yet realized.

We owe 8.2 million dollars on the construction of our sanctuary and ministry center. You might have seen in our campaign DVD I referenced a saying from my growing up years in rural Ohio: "Git 'R Done." When it comes to completing what we started in this Ministry Center, we want to Git 'R Done!

We're right where we want to be. We are on time and nearly on budget. We seek additionally to raise \$362,000 to distribute among our four mission projects.

First, we want to take CHO, a local relief ministry, to the next level with our support.

Second, we will make a significant investment in the next generation through summer camps like Ligonier and Meadowkirk.

Third, we will expand our support for a medical mission in Haiti, the poorest country in the western hemisphere.

Fourth, we endeavor to bring a Christian world view to the practice of psychotherapy through our new counseling center. You won't find many counseling centers in Northern Virginia that have as a goal in their business model seeing 50 percent of their clients on a sliding fee arrangement.

We want to take the biggest step possible in this campaign to fulfill God's call-equip-send mission. Our Advanced Commitment phase of our capital campaign has raised three million dollars. Isn't that awesome! If

everybody does his/her part, we'll reach our goal. We're not interested merely in amassing the most money possible. We believe the practice of inviting God to help us become generous givers is equally important. As we have prayed in the past, "Lord, what level of giving is appropriate to express my gratitude?"

We are calling this effort our "Open Doors...Open Hearts" campaign. The Biblical warrant for this campaign originates from Paul's letter to the Colossians, "Pray for us, that God will open doors for telling the mystery of Christ" (Colossians 4:2).

We will observe communion this morning by the ancient practice of intinction. We symbolize by coming forward the offering of our whole selves to the Lord. The baskets situated at each communion station enable us to present our morning offering as well as present our Open Doors...Open Hearts pledge cards.

We have been preaching since January on the kingdom of God. "The kingdom of God has come near," Jesus said. Don't bury your talents, invest them in the kingdom.

