

Tale of Two Parables

As the Jesus of Matthew's Gospel draws closer to Jerusalem, his parables about the kingdom of heaven come thick and fast. The 25th chapter of Matthew's gospel is a "parable sandwich." Last week we heard the parable of the wise and foolish bridesmaids. Next week is the parable of the last judgment, and today we have the peanut butter in the sandwich. Whether we like it or not, we must confront the parable of the talents.

A harsh master who reaps where he did not sow and gathers where he did not scatter rewards servants who earn him profits and punishes the one who doesn't.

Not exactly uplifting reading, is it?

Jesus' parables are impossible to pigeonhole. Some seem to be allegories – or at least they start off that way. Others seem to be simple comparisons, but turn out to be more complicated than first meets the ear. And some, like this one, make you want to say to Jesus, "*Really?* Is that *really* what the kingdom of heaven is like? Those who have much get more and those who have little get even less?"

Perhaps it's helpful to begin with what this parable does not teach. It does not teach that it is God's will that "the rich get rich and the poor get poorer," or that those who fail to make lots of money are lazy, worthless people who deserve to be thrown into the "outer darkness" (which is Bible-speak for "hell").

The myth of the "deserving" and "undeserving" poor is persistent in our culture. It seems to go hand-in-hand with capitalism, and provides a good excuse for the "haves" to justify the plight of the "have-nots."

Walk on past that guy with the handmade sign. If you give him a dollar, he'll probably spend it on booze or cigarettes.

It's a shame people can't live on the minimum wage, but they should have stayed in school longer and made better choices when they were young.

Today's poor are like that first slave who buried his master's talent in the ground. It might sound harsh to say it out loud, but they deserve what they get.

Jill Duffield writes,

Studies on poverty and scholars who have conducted and written about those studies consistently debunk the myth that being poor is due to personal failings, yet it persists. No matter how many times the math is shown about a living wage, the cost of housing, the unavailability of affordable childcare, transportation or education, the belief belies the facts and those with one talent have even that taken away from them.¹

I doubt that the majority members of the House of Representatives had this parable in mind when they passed their tax-cut package last week, but their bill resonates with a portion of this parable: **“For to all those who have, more will be given . . .”**

A full 25% of the tax cuts in the House bill will go to the top 1% of the population – the super-rich. Independent analysts predict that some 13 million people will lose their health insurance due to the bill’s crippling of the Affordable Care Act, and as the budget deficit rises, Medicare benefits will decline.

It’s hard to imagine a more dramatic example of the rich getting richer while the poor foot the bill. **“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.”**

And people say the Bible is out of touch with modern life.

The truth of the matter is, people in Jesus’ day were quite familiar with the kind of master described in this parable. He’s all about measurable objectives and productivity quotas. He worships the bottom line. He wants results, and he doesn’t care how he gets them. He rewards those who produce, and those who don’t he dispatches to the abyss.

The master in this parable is not God, but he sure is familiar. We see his type in the halls of Congress right now, and sometimes we see him staring back at us in the mirror. He sits on our shoulder and whispers in our ear when we see people pull out

¹ Jill Duffield, *Looking into the Lectionary*, *Presbyterian Outlook* blog.

their food stamp card at the grocery store. He tells us not to worry about the folks who are forced to use the emergency room for their primary health care. They made their bed. Let them lie in it.

Whatever else Jesus wants us to derive from this parable, surely, we are not to take it as an admonition to emulate the master in his story.

Most preachers, including me, tend to focus instead on the slaves in the story and how they manage the talents the master gives them. A “talent” was a measure of money. The footnote in my Bible informs me that it would have taken a laborer in Jesus’ day more than 15 years to earn a talent’s worth of wages. Even one talent was a lot of money. Five talents was a fortune in itself – representing two-and-a-half lifetimes of hard work.

It didn’t take long for the word “talent” to take on another meaning, of course. Now it means a God-given ability or gift – something you discover you’re good at. Something worth nurturing. Something you can use to the glory of God.

If this story is about using your talents, note these two points: First, the talents in the story don’t belong to the slaves. They belong to the master.

*We give thee but thine own, (goes the old hymn)
Whate'er the gift may be
For all we have is thine alone,
A trust, O Lord, from thee.*

That principle applies to “talents” in the modern sense. In fact, it applies to all of life – “whate’er the gift may be.”

Second, please note what motivates the slave with the one talent to get out his shovel and start digging. It’s not because he doubts the value of what he has been given. It’s because he’s afraid. He knows his master to be a full-fledged jerk, and a nasty one at that. So, out of fear, he takes no chances. He plays it safe, and ends up in hell.

Fear-based decisions do not make for God-pleasing results. When we do put our talents to good use, it’s not because we fear God’s retribution. It’s because we’re thankful for what has been entrusted to us.

Clearly, this is a parable about accountability, but remember who is telling it. It is the Jesus of the Sermon on the Mount as well as the Jesus who gets our attention with a story about a fearful slave and a disreputable master. It is the Jesus who both calls us to account and bids us find our rest in him, for his yoke is gentle and his burden is light.

Here's a modern parable I'd like you to hold alongside this ancient one. A few days ago, an envelope arrived in my inbox. Inside was a handwritten card, carefully printed. The card read,

Dear Sir,

Several years ago, I stopped by your office and asked you for a small cash donation as I was homeless and living out of my truck with my small dog, and the gas tank was almost empty. You opened your desk and handed me \$30.00 which was like manna from heaven. I'm returning that now, plus a little more. I follow (your church) in the news, so keep up the good work. In Christ, (And he signed his name; his first name is Jerrod).

As I was reading the card, out fell a fifty-dollar bill. (That's a pretty good return on a \$30.00 investment. Start with 3 talents. End with 5 talents. Not bad.)

Before that week was over, a homeless man came round with news of a job offer. "All I need is a pair of steel-toed boots, and I can go to work," he said.

I looked it up online. Steel-toed boots cost almost exactly \$50.00.

Lord George McCleod, the founder of the Iona Community in Scotland used to say, "If you think that's a coincidence, I wish you a very dull life."

So, beloved, put these two parables together – the one that Jesus tells and the one that Jerrod tells. In both, hear some Good News for living toward the kingdom of heaven.