

FPCU

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Investments: Parable of the Talents*Scripture Reading: Matthew 25:14-30*

(Jesus said) “For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; ¹⁵to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. At once ¹⁶the one who had received the five talents went off and traded with them and made five more talents. ¹⁷In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. ¹⁸But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master’s money. ¹⁹After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. ²⁰Then 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.’ ²¹His 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.’ ²²And 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.’ ²³His 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.’ ²⁴Then 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, ²⁵so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.’ ²⁶But 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? ²⁷Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. ²⁸So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. ²⁹For 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. ³⁰As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’

This parable seems pretty straightforward – clear in its meaning for us, even in today’s world. Let me remind you, however, that parables are rarely straightforward. They have depths and shocks to them, made to make you ponder, like riddles – which is why Jesus used them so often as teaching tools. This is also why we pray before reading the Bible – that the Holy Spirit might guide each one of us to hear what

God's word is to us today. Let's explore its depths – and you can decide in what ways God is speaking to you through this text.

The story is interesting from the start: a very rich man of property goes away for a long time. He entrusts an enormous amount of money to his slaves. Here is the first shock. A talent is the equivalent of 15 years' salary for a typical worker. He is entrusting a fortune to mere slaves for an unlimited time! Two of them do well – they take some risks, invest their 5 or 2 talents, and are able to give the Master back an even bigger fortune. "Well done!" he cries, "enter into the joy of your master." This expression probably means that he actually is adopting them, welcoming them into his own family. The third slave, however, hides the money out of fear, not even banking it and making some interest. The angry Master kicks him out.

What if this parable is literally about money? We often jump too quickly to the idea of using our talents. So let's ponder that scary word in the church, "money." We live in a society that is wealthier (per person) than any that has come before; we live in one of the richest nations in the world. I wonder in what ways God wants us to use our money – what kinds of investments is God calling for? In what ways does each one of us use the income we have, no matter how limited? In what ways does the church? And what about our nation? I will have more to say about this in the future.

Or perhaps this parable really is about talents. Our English word, "talent," truly descends from the Greek word in the Bible, "*talenton*" meaning weight, or what is weighed, in other words, money. It went into the Latin, then Old French and then on to us from the Norman Conquest of England, coming to mean our gifts and abilities. If so, what is God reminding us about the use of our abilities and talents? What is Jesus telling his listeners and us?

Let me remind you that Jesus understands very well the temptation to hide like the fearful steward. I think he had to wrestle with this temptation. Remember his first miracle? The wedding at Cana? He and his mother and his disciples are at a wedding. The host runs out of wine. His mom commands him to do something about this, and he replies that it's not time yet to do a miracle, a sign, and reveal who he is. But she is right and he is wrong and he knows it. Isn't he hesitating, thinking of hiding out some more? He knows what happens once he starts! He can see the inevitable road to the cross ahead. And yet, he has gathered disciples; he is starting to train them. And so he overcomes that temptation, turns the water into wine, and launches himself into his ministry.

We all know what it is to hide our talents. When I was growing up, girls learned to hide their intelligence and focus on looks in order to be more “womanly.” (For example, I was told I should let my godparents’ son win the next chess game after I had won; I never played chess again). Boys were told to hide their compassion and sensitivities in order to be “manly.” What a steep price we all paid for that!

Often we believe that our abilities, our possible contributions, are too small and humble to be of any help or worth. So we hide, or do not volunteer. But all our gifts are needed! Our money, our talents, our time – all our resources. They are what Dr. Eric Law calls “Holy Currencies.” He uses holy currencies to help churches evaluate their assets. These include the holy currencies of time and place, gracious leadership, relationships, truth, compassion, money. Your contributions are holy currencies. Your Mission Study Team will be sending out surveys soon which use some of these categories of “holy currencies.” Everyone will be asked to fill them out so that your opinion is heard. Stay tuned – you will learn more very soon!

The question for me, however, is what is the purpose of using our money or our talents – our holy currencies? In what **ways** are we to invest them, as in this parable? There are always risks in investing – how do we do that wisely?

Let’s zoom out and look at the broader context in which this parable is set. Here towards the end of Matthew’s Gospel there are 4 parables in a row, 3 of them in Chapter 25. These are Jesus’ last parables before heading into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday and ultimately to the cross. He is anxious to get his teachings across to his disciples then, and his disciples now. And what we find is a common theme: the theme of **waiting**, waiting for the Master, the King, to return. Jesus knew that it would be a long while, in human time, before his Second Coming, his return. In Mt. 24, Jesus warns that you won’t know when he is coming, even though false prophets will say, “Here he is! There he is!” The fabulous signs in the heavens and on earth will happen **when** he arrives. You will have to wait. And then come 4 parables about waiting: first, in chapter 24, about the faithful steward who works hard and treats the servants and property well, versus that unfaithful one who beats and abuses them and steals and drinks with drunkards. The good steward has invested time and energy in the holy currencies of the resources and property; the bad steward has not.

The second parable, at the beginning of Mt. 25 (on screen), is about the faithful v. unfaithful virgins. Just a quick run-through on this one: the ten bridesmaids are waiting for the bridegroom to come in the night, keeping vigil with their oil lamps lit. But the bridegroom seems delayed and 5 of them are going to run out of oil. The others refuse to share because then they too will run out of oil, so the 5 foolish ones

run to the store to get more, and miss the bridegroom when he comes. They get shut out of the wedding feast. “Keep awake, then,” says Jesus. Be prepared. Invest well. And we are led to ask, “What does the oil in the lamp represent? What holy currencies are being given energy and money and time?”

The third parable is where ours is placed, echoing again that theme of waiting for the Master to return. It’s a long wait. A holy currency must be invested, multiplied – and when done faithfully, opens a welcome into the Master’s family.

And there is a fourth parable, part of which is on screen. This time, the waiting is over, and the judgment by the King is here. He separates out the sheep and the goats on his right and left hand, blesses the sheep and give them their inheritance, his kingdom. “What did we do right?” they ask. The King has a list: they fed him when hungry, gave him drink when thirsty, welcomed him when a stranger/an alien, clothed him when naked, cared for him when sick, and visited him when imprisoned. Whew! What a list! The sheep say, we did that? Really? When? And the King replies: “whenever you did this to the least of these, you did it to me.”

Now, I think, we get the full picture that these parables paint all together, although each one also teaches by itself. We are to wait trustingly and faithfully. The unfaithful steward who drank away his master’s wealth, and the slave who buried his talent, both did not trust their master. They did not recognize who their real master was – a master who trusted them, gave them high honors by turning over much of his property and wealth to them, who respected their abilities. Instead of the kindly, trusting Lord they worked for, they saw a harsh, punitive one. They missed the whole picture.

The Lord in all these parables is caring, compassionate, understanding the ability of each slave, steward or bridesmaid. He expects his people to know that, to be willing to work hard and invest well their time and talents – their holy currencies. What do these investments and this work look like? They look like the kingdom of God, their inheritance. They are making manifest these persons’ faith in the Master. They show forth who the Lord is.

Our Constitution, the *Book of Order*, says that one of the “Great Ends” (or aims) of the church is “to exhibit the kingdom of God.” This is our church’s goal: to show what the kingdom of God looks like to others.

Confused? Too many parables all at once? Here are the main ideas: as we wait for everything to be set right when Jesus returns, we are to wait with faith, with living

out and showing God's kingdom in all that we do, taking good care of what God offers.

You see, these parables are guides for us in today's world, as we struggle to live holy lives, worthy of our Lord Jesus. We are to exhibit God's love by showing love for the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the sick, the prisoner, the stranger. We are to take care of the earth and the resources God gives us by being good stewards. We are to treat others fairly and compassionately. We are to invest our own resources into the work of God.

It's hard to do this on one's own. It takes a family, a community, a church. And we have that here, as we name the holy currencies we have, as we encourage each other. And best of all, we have the power and guidance and comfort of the Holy Spirit, always with us, refreshed in us anew as we gather at this banquet table. For this is the wedding feast prepared by our Lord Jesus Christ, and we are welcome! Amen!