

FIRST CHRISTIAN CHURCH  
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SERMON: THE PARABLE OF THE TALENTS

TEXT: 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.’”

Let’s try something different. I want to share with you an old rabbinic story from the Middle Ages, somewhat updated.

Once two men were born into the same village on the same day. One was born in the ghetto to a poor and struggling family, hungry all the time. All his life he wondered

what it would be like to be rich. He was a good Jew, obedient to the law, even generous to beggars who were worse off than he was. He looked at the rich man's family, which lived on the hill above the town, and wondered what it would be like to have more than you needed, or a lot of options, and he was jealous of the life he was not given.

The other man was born to the rich family, and he lived with wealth, privilege, and education. He too was a good Jew, obedient to the law, generous to the poor and well respected in the community. He looked down on the village and the poor part of town and saw all the poor people as pretty much the same, no one standing out at all.

And then...both men died on the same day. They got to the gates of heaven together and were very surprised to find St. Peter waiting for them, with the gates wide open. He stepped forward and shoved past the poor man and welcomed the rich man into the kingdom with open arms. In fact there was a red carpet rolled out, a band and trumpets, and all the kingdom of heaven turned out for a parade, speeches and a dinner in his honor.

The poor man was stunned and only managed to unceremoniously slip in before the gates closed. He watched in fascination, and grew more and more concerned and angry. This was not the way it was supposed to be. He'd believed that because his life was hard on earth, he would be rewarded greatly in heaven, and that the rich on earth would have "hell to pay." But this was looking just like earth, with the rich being treated specially and the poor cast aside and forgotten. Why, nobody even knew he was here. He was in, but was it worth it.

He stayed around for the dinner and became even more angry and annoyed. It was a feast, a banquet, with glowing accounts of the rich man's life. Then came the last straw. The man was given the keys to the biggest mansion the poor man had ever seen in his life - or his dreams. That was it! The poor man decided to tell St. Peter off, and if this was heaven, he wanted out! Hell couldn't be worse than this. He boldly went up to Peter as things were winding down and accosted him loudly, reminding him that he was here too and that he was fed up.

Petter was stunned and chagrined and apologetic, profusely welcoming him and telling him that he was sorry he had forgotten all about him. But the man would not be eased or mollified - he was indignant and wanted out. He listed all the things the rich man had received and pointed out that he had gotten nothing - except the gates of heaven nearly slammed into his face. Peter tried to reassure him, telling him that he

did have a mansion, and it made the rich man's look like a shack. That slowed him down some and he thought he'd at least go take a look before he left.

He was taken deep into the kingdom, close to the throne of God. He couldn't believe his eyes – it was magnificent. Peter told him that the rich man's mansion was way outside the inner court of heaven. But the man was still angry – okay, so I have a really nice place close to the throne of God, but why didn't I get the red carpet and the fanfare and the music and the dinner and the speeches and the attention the rich man got? It wasn't fair! I know, said Pete, as he put his arm around the poor man. I know. But you have to understand. People like you come through here every hour, every day, but do you know how long it's been since someone like him got in?

What do you think of that? Funny – maybe to some. Provocative – certainly!

That story is all about money – at least on the surface. On a deeper level it's about who gets into heaven – and has nothing to do with being rich or poor and everything to do about being faithful and following God's directives. Just so with our Parable of the Talents.

Yes, our parable is on the surface level all about money – since a “talent,” in biblical terminology, referred to the equivalent of 15 years of wages for a day laborer. That's a lot of money – at least for a day laborer. Not so much so if you are in the upper 1%. But on a deeper level...

You know the story: the rich man invested 5 talents in the hands of his first servant, 2 talents with his second servant, and 1 talent in the hands of the last servant. And then he went away for an extended trip.

When the rich man returned he called his three servants in for an accounting of his investments. The first and second servants came forward with pride. They had doubled the man's money! The rich man nearly bubbled with delight at all their hard work and wise investing. He lavished praise on them and promised to put them in charge of far greater investments in the future.

But when the third servant came forward it was a different story. He began badly. He called his master a “harsh man.” How many times have you done that to your boss and come out smelling like a rose? You can sense where this was going!

He continued, talking about how the man had a reputation for, “reaping where [he] did not sow, and gathering where [he] did not scatter seed.” Do you get the sense that his hole was big enough that he did not need to dig anymore?

Furthermore, he told his master that he was afraid, so he simply buried the talent in the ground. He then presented the master with the original talent, slightly muddy.

The master was greatly upset. He expected at least to have earned some interest! He chastised the man severely. It must have been hard to watch! In the end, all that the man had was taken away and he was cast out. He had failed his master.

Now, let's leave the thought of money for a moment. Since the Middle Ages the word “talent” has come to mean “God given abilities, gifts, and graces.” That is a lot broader than just financial assets!

On a deeper level this parable is all about what we, Christians, God's servants in this world, are EXPECTED to do with all the talents/gifts/abilities/resources which God has invested in us - until that time when God shall come down or we shall be called up to give an account for our life and for what we have accomplished for God.

God has given us time. Some of us more than others. But whatever time God has invested in us - have we used it wisely? I'm not talking about how we've used it for our happiness or security. Have we used it wisely - for God? Have we spent our time on the sorts of things that would please God - doing good for the poor, the oppressed, the infirm; spreading the Good News; and sharing forgiveness and mercy? Or have we spent it all on ourselves?

God has given us gobs of talents: teaching, wood working, public speaking, playing football, plumbing, writing, cooking....and so, so, so many more. Have we used the talents God has given us to benefit God or just to our own benefit?

And financial gifts, those too, have you used what God has given you to God's benefit or spent them all on yourself?

What does God expect of Christians?

I'm not talking about what is required of us to be saved. After that!! What does God expect of people who have already turned their lives over to Jesus and have a reservation in heaven?

What does God expect Christians to do with what we have in the time we have left?

God expects us to use what we have and who we are for God's glory and to hasten the coming of God's kingdom – and not that we hide them in a jar in a hole in the back yard or even behind a curtain of fear of failure.

This reminds me of a story.

There was a fabulously wealthy man who, for his entire life, collected Stradivarius violins, amassing more than 200 violins which he kept in a climate controlled vault – away from human hands – soundless. The silent violins were never allowed to fulfill the purpose for which they had been made – to fill the world with beautiful music. It was a travesty – a crime against musicians and music lovers and certainly against Stradivari, their creator.

Your talents, abilities, and resources come from God and they are intended to fill the world with the Good News of Jesus Christ and hasten the coming of God's kingdom!

Don't waste time worrying about yesterday or all the yesterdays of your life. Think about your future. From now until the Jesus comes down or we are called up to give an account of our stewardship, think: "What will you do for God with what you have in the time you have left?"

I'm not sure that accommodations in heaven will be based on productivity – but are you comfortable planning your eternal retirement without covering that possibility?