

## **Sermon: Heartless Master, Worthless Slave**

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles Ottawa, Nov 19, 2023)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts  
be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

The parables of Jesus are never dull. Sometimes they reinforce what one already believes, prodding one to put faith into action. Sometimes they challenge one's initial assumption, forcing one to re-evaluate one's priorities. Sometimes, they are like a Trojan horse, appearing to be one thing, but as it gets deeper into one's consciousness, it morphs into something else completely different, foreign even. The Parable of the Talents is precisely such. Coming after the Parable of the Ten Bridesmaid, this parable continues the theme of an apocalyptic discourse of the coming Kingdom of Heaven in Matthew 25.

A wealthy man was going away on a journey, so he entrusted his property to three servants, or slaves really according to the original Greek. To one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, each according to his ability, but it should be noted, without giving any instruction on what to do with them.

The one with five talents put it to work, trading with others and making five more. The one with two talents did the same, profiting an additional two. Now it should be noted that the English word 'talent', which denotes special ability inherent or acquired, is not the same as the Greek word 'talanta', which in the time of Jesus, was the largest tradable currency denomination.

A silver 'talanta' is worth about 6,000 denarii. One denarii was the usual day's wage for a labourer, so we are talking about fifteen years worth income. A gold 'talanta' is worth at least thirty times that much. So 30 times 15 = 450 years worth of income of an average labourer. By my calculation, one gold 'talanta' in today's term is worth about \$22 million Canadian dollar. That's a whole lot of money! Perhaps a better translation for 'talanta' is not talent, but a megabuck, or a suitcase full of gold, or the jackpot of Lotto 649. Certainly it was not something that Jesus, an obscure teacher coming out a forgotten corner of Galilee, would have ever seen or possessed.

To this unimaginably immense wealth, the first two servants doubled it! Well done, good and faithful servants, that is the stuff dreams are made

off. I should know, I was, in my previous career, once a commodity future trader, trading bond and stock futures on the Montreal and Toronto exchange.

I certainly wouldn't have mind if someone was to give me \$110 million, and certainly would have been rejoicing, that is partying like there was no tomorrow, had I been able to make \$110 million from that. I certainly would not have cared that money was made at the expense someone else who lost out. Hay, they don't call it a 'zero sum game' for nothing! If I made it, I own it now, and I am commended by my master / investor, who promises to give me more. The rich gets richer, the poor, well they are always with us, aren't they? As long as I am not one of them, as long as I am on the right side of this ledger, all is good, thank you very much!

This may sound crass, but who needs justice, mercy, equality, compassion, or even faith when you are in possession of \$220 million and counting. This parable in Matthew 25 should be held up by the prosperity gospel folks and the megachurch pastor, as the gold plated must read, must emulate text taught by Jesus himself: double your talanta because it is God's will that you should be fruitful and multiply!

However, just like a Trojan horse, the Parable of the Talents pivots on the third servant, slave really, who was watching patiently this celebration of immense and unnatural wealth. When it was his turn, he literally pooped the party, saying in verse 24, *'Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow and gathering where you did not scatter, so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.'*

How would you judge this slave, if you were his master? Would you be sympathetic to his fear? Perhaps he heard of the plight of those five bridesmaids, who did not preserve their oil. Perhaps this slave was simply being sensible by not betting on the Jericho olive oil futures market, and losing in the process, his shirt along with his talanta. Perhaps he was right to call out this unjust master for reaping where he did not sow, and gather where he did not scatter.

But the master in this parable had no sympathy. He called him a wicked and lazy slave! He actually agreed with this slave's assessment, that he was in fact quite greedy and unjust, in reaping without sowing and gathering without scattering. Then the master added, in verse 27, *"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.”*

Isn't charging interest forbidden in the Bible? I think I read that somewhere? Yes I did, I did, in Deuteronomy 23:19, "*You shall not charge interest on loans to another Israelite, interest on money, interest on provisions, interest on anything that is lent.*"

What is going on with this master? Not only is he unjust, he is now quite upset with his slave for not doing something that is patently illegal, as prescribed in the Torah. Adding insult to injury, he then took the lone talent from him and gave it to the one who already has ten. And the final nail to this coffin: he threw out this worthless slave, into the outer darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth—an often repeated phrase in Matthew describing the wicket, the unrighteous, who will have no part in the coming Kingdom of Heaven.

Should we agree with the master in calling this slave '**worthless**'? That line of interpretation is quite traditional and prevalent. Even I had preached a few 'stewardship' sermons, on being fruitful with what God has given us, whether the talent is money or ability, one should not simply bury and squander it.

The other possible line of interpretation is to see the master as '**heartless**', as representing a worldly value that 'might is right', wealth is to be accumulated at any cost, and certainly not to be distributed. It should be noted that such value is not congruent with what the Bible reveals of the Lord God, "who is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, who does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities." (Psalm 103:8-10)

Furthermore, seeing the master as heartless, necessitates standing with that cast-out slave, with all who have been oppressed, stripped of their dignity, called 'worthless' by societal standards, or using the vocabulary of Jesus: the sinners and the tax collectors. How then should one read this Parable of the Talents? Did I not say that the parables of Jesus are never dull!

Look, I am not going to give you an answer today, for I am probably as conflicted and bewildered as the original hearers of this parable. Those who have ears, hear. Maybe that is the precisely the point—faith is not that simple, and it is to be meditated constantly, and to be worked out with fear and trembling.

I will leave you with this thought: in less than a week after teaching this parable, Jesus would be arrested, tried, convicted, executed by an unholy alliance of Pilate, Herod and Caiaphas. For speaking truth to power just like the so-called 'worthless slave', Jesus would suffer the ultimate indignation of his time, being crucified on a cross. As Isaiah prophesied centuries before that event, "*But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement for our peace was upon Him, and by His stripes we are healed.*" (Isaiah 53:5)

For that the Lord God be praised.

In the name of the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**