

The Parable of the Talents and the Judgement of the Nations

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The Parable of the Talents is so well known that often when it is read, we simply turn our minds off because we already know what it says. But this morning I would invite you to look again at the parable and perhaps to see some things we have not noticed before.

Note, first of all, that the parable is about obedience to an absent master: "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."

A similar dimension may be seen in many of the parables that illustrate the nature of our stewardship. In many of those parables, there is a master, an owner, but in them also the master is absent. Indeed, the theme of the absence of the master runs through those parables that we usually call "the parables of stewardship."

Earlier in this 25th chapter of Matthew, in the parable immediately preceding the Parable of the Talents, we read that "Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. But the bridegroom was delayed." In other words, he was not present, and they had to decide how to act in his absence.

In Matthew 24: "But if that wicked slave says to himself, 'my master is delayed,' the master of that slave will come..."

And in Matthew 21: "There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watchtower. Then he leased it to tenants and went to another country."

All of these parables, in one way or another, speak of the absence of the master, or of the bridegroom, or of the owner.

We often speak of the presence of God, and rightly so. But this other theme, or metaphor of absence, is also common in the Bible. Even apart from sin, God gives the human creature space, freedom to exercise its responsibility. You remember the story in the garden, how after creating humankind and giving it dominion over the rest of creation, God lets them exercise that dominion, even though it also implies the possibility of sin. And this absence, just as much as the divine presence, is a sign of love, just as a parent out of love finds it necessary to step back and let a child try his or her wings, even at the risk of pain and failure. A parent who is always present, guarding a child from every risk and every hurt, is not a very good parent. A child whose parents are always hovering around, guarding the child's every step, will never grow up. Soren Kierkegaard expresses the same idea with a different metaphor when he says that a

soldier's faithfulness to his captain is not proven when the captain is present but rather when the captain is absent and obedience is still required.

Second, it is important to point out that what the master gives each of the three servants is a substantial amount of money. We are so accustomed to using the term "talents" as a synonym of "ability" or "gift" that we forget that for Jesus's first hearers a "talent" was a sum of money—indeed, a rather considerable sum of money. It would take a fully employed wage earner, working almost every day of the year, approximately 15 years to make a talent. Thus, what the first servant receives is not a "gift" or an ability to do something, but a sum of money in the neighborhood of two million of today's dollars. The second gets some \$800,000. And we have little reason to feel sorry for the third, who receives some \$400,000. To Jesus's first hearers, most of whom probably never saw more than an occasional silver coin, those sums must have seemed fabulous. They certainly would not have thought, as we often do today, that the third servant received a paltry sum. It is not, as sometimes we tend to think, that the third servant received such a small sum that he thought it was not worth investing. They are each given what could be considered a substantial working capital.

The slave who had one talent behaved in a radically different fashion from the others. He had been entrusted with *one* talent, a very significant sum. He was afraid of losing it, of being unable to restore it upon the master's return. So, he put it in a safe place where he could give it

back, unchanged. The master's directions to the slaves did not include any directions for what they were to do.

Why should that servant be blamed? He guarded the master's property very well. One could almost say that he guarded it far better than the other two guarded their shares. After all, the other two must have been taking some serious risks if they managed to double their investments. They could have lost everything.

This third slave is blamed because he acted as a guard and not as a steward. A guard has to know nothing of the owner's intentions, as long as he keeps what has been entrusted to him. A steward, on the other hand, must be close enough to the owner to act in his stead, to dare make decisions as the owner would have made them. A steward may know that the master is harsh but knows enough of the master's interests and intentions to act in the master's stead when the master is absent. The third slave acted out of fear. Fear is a good motivation for a guard, but it will not do for a steward.

There are people who tithe out of a sense of fear, afraid that God will be angry if they do not do so, or whose generosity is created by a legalistic sense that only on that basis will God be propitiated. Such people are guards, no matter how much they give. Those who love God and God's world, who respond out of gratitude for the grace of God, those are true stewards. The steward takes risks; the guard does not. The steward truly acts as he believes the master would,

were the master there. He uses his best judgment in this matter, believing that if he does so, he will have his master's blessing. In a sense, the slave who acts as a true steward has, at least for the time being, ceased to be a slave. He acts like the master; he manages in the master's stead. The slave who refuses this role, who guards what he has been given, refuses the role of steward and therefore remains all the time a slave.

Stewardship is not a matter of obligation; it is a matter of love. It is not something we do because God is looking over our shoulder, ready to punish us if we do not give enough, but rather something we do because God has left us a space to be ourselves, to manage God's creation in God's name. It is not a task for slaves but for representatives of the Great King. It is not a matter of law, but of love.

But in some ways the passage does not end with verse 30. We are so accustomed to reading this parable as a unit that we often forget that what follows is in some ways the interpretation of the parable. In the parable, the master's temporary absence ends with his return to receive reports and render judgment. As a result, the parable speaks of some who are invited into the joy of their master, and another who is cast out into outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

The passage that follows immediately after the parable deals with the same subject: the return of the absent master and the ensuing judgment. It is the well-known passage of the Judgment

of the Nations, that begins: "When the Son of Man comes in his glory . . . he will sit on the throne of his glory." What results is the separation of the sheep and the goats, in which some are praised and given the kingdom as inheritance, and others are condemned and cast out into eternal fire.

What we often miss, however, is that while the Parable of the Talents and so many of the other parables about stewardship speak of a master who is absent, the passage about the judgment of the nations speaks about a master who is present, not only after his return, but even during his apparent absence. Note that the Son of Man returns and tells those on his right hand as well as those on his left: "I was hungry... I was thirsty... I was a stranger..." In other words, even during my absence I was present.

The Parable of the Talents tells us that the Master is absent and that during that absence we have responsibilities. The judgment of the nations tells us that even while he is absent, the Master is actually present. But he is present, not where we would expect, in the manor house, or in the seignorial palace, or even in the church, but rather in the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the stranger, the prisoner, the sick...

Perhaps the reason why these two passages stand back-to-back in the Gospel of Matthew is precisely that, without the Judgment of the Nations, we are likely to interpret the Parable of the Talents in such a way as to make us guards rather than stewards. If we read the Parable of the

Talents by itself and take it to mean that we are to manage whatever it is that God has given us so that it becomes more, and that anything that might seem to diminish it is unfaithful stewardship, most likely we shall end up being guards rather than stewards. This has often been the temptation of the church, with the result that in many cases it has become more and more wealthy, but less and less faithful.

If, on the other hand, we read the Parable of the Talents in the light of the Judgment of the Nations, it follows that the most faithful thing we can do with what God has given to us is to give it away, to use it in the service of the absent master who is present in the poor, the hungry, and the needy. Let us do so. And let us do it with the joy of those who know that we have been entrusted by God most high to be managers and stewards in God's stead.

