Matthew 25: 14-30

**The Parable of the Talents** by Dr Maxwell Reid 19th November 2023

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

Because today’s setting is in the last week of Jesus’ life, we know that he would soon be going away, and during this impending absence, he instructed his disciples to endure through challenging times and to live in anticipation of his return. Like the parable of the ten maidens last week by Gillian, the parable of the talents portrayed the kingdom of God. Like all the parables in this section, this one exemplifies the certainty of the Lord’s coming, and how the disciples should live in the meantime.

In this story a wealthy man (the Master) prepares for a journey by entrusting his estate to a selected few of his servants.  Although the first received five times as much as the last, each received a significant sum of money.

A talent was equal to about 6,000 denarii. Since one denarius was at the time a common labourer’s daily wage, a talent would be roughly equivalent to 20 years wages for the average worker. Five talents, the largest amount entrusted to any of the servants, was comparable to one hundred years’ worth of labour. This was a phenomenal achievement and an astronomical amount of money.

Historically, it might be that these slaves would have been overseers who had slaves under their employment. They would collect payments from these peasant farmers working the land belonging to the master. This was a sort of feudal system, and no doubt the entrusted slaves would pocket a portion of it on the side for themselves. Nice work if you can get it.

Like the preceding two parables, the return of the master is imminent, but the timing is unknown. After a long absence, he discovered what each servant had done with his property. The first two slaves did business with the master’s talents and doubled his money.

Although the first slave earned more than the second, each had done remarkably well with what he had been given. They had performed according to their potential, and they had been faithful to do what the master required of them.

The master commended the slaves for being good and faithful, and entrusted them with even more authority.

The third servant was not so fortunate. He admitted that he was afraid to lose the master’s money. To protect himself, he had buried the talent in the ground.

Although this may seem odd to audiences today, burying treasure was quite a common practice in those days to deter thieves. These days people are still looking for treasure thought to be buried by pirates!

What became clear in this story, is that we as an audience learned even more about this master. He was a man who aggressively sought to expand his estate and take whatever he could wherever he could to make a profit.

The master was furious. He had entrusted this servant with a portion of his property in order that the slave would use his abilities — abilities that had helped the master in the past, to turn a profit.

This slave, however, was too afraid to take a risk, and instead, he attempted to secure his own well-being. In this first century example of capital venture, they were expected to exploit the slaves below them and make a profit. Two servants were found faithful in this respect by increasing the master’s wealth and expanding his estate. Sadly, this type of exploitation of people in poor countries still exists today and is more commonplace than people are comfortable with.

In my opinion, the master’s mission to earn money at the expense of others challenged any interpretation of the parable that would directly correlate him with Jesus, who was just the opposite, and never acted in a manner to seek personal gain.

So, what does the parable mean? What are we supposed to think? Notwithstanding a host of different interpretations by evangelists, if this parable is in some way supposed to justify a gospel of economic prosperity at the expense of others, such an interpretation doesn’t really pass muster.

Consequently, I don’t expect that Jesus gave us this parable as a lesson in economics, or to illustrate the poor treatment of staff. It is more likely that this parable suggested they demonstrate their faithfulness in anticipation the return of the Lord by using their God given talents to spread the gospel actively, working to increase believers in Christ’s world, rather than burying their faith in the ground, when it was almost certain that their faith would be tested in the future.

To me the message from Jesus is quite clear, albeit it somewhat overstated, that to take the easy road, to be lukewarm, never to take a stand, is not really to live at all. This message challenges believers to emulate their master, um, Jesus that is, by using all that God has given us for the sake of the kingdom.

The suggestion is that one who buries the treasure of God’s love will never gain anything at all. Mind you, I expect that life can be easier for one who never has an opinion on anything.

Quite simply, the one who does nothing with their life, believes nothing, volunteers for nothing and sits on the fence between anything controversial in nature, can avoid any blame. Easy!

On the contrary, Jesus was just the opposite to such a philosophy in life, announcing the arrival of God’s kingdom by feeding the hungry, curing the sick, blessing the meek, serving the least, visiting the sick and imprisoned, clothing the naked, welcoming the stranger, the list is extensive.

Jesus called all of us who follow, to preach the good news of the kingdom to the whole world, by going about the work we have been called to do. Are we going to spread the word of God, or just play safe, do nothing about it, and bury it.

But there was a difference between the parable and the example Jesus was to us. Unlike the master’s “do what I say” attitude, Jesus gave us another one of his “do as I doisms”. All we have to do is decide what we are going to do with the precious time we have left, that God has given us.

Perhaps this is what was intended in the prayer Jesus gave us, when each week we say to God “your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth, as it is in heaven.

Amen