

INTEREST...ing!

[based on Matthew 25: 14-30]

The parable of the talents... What is Jesus trying to teach us anyway? Who is this man with servants, who goes on a journey? What exactly are the talents he gives to those servants? And finally, how does the parable apply to us in today's world?

An important rule to remember when looking at Scripture, is that one must examine the context. Of course, that rule doesn't just apply to Scripture! Politicians regularly complain that someone has taken their words **out of** context...

When Jesus says: 'For **it** will be like...', what's the '**it**'?! Well, Jesus must be referring to something He's just been talking about. So, let's consider the context when Jesus decides to tell the story of the talents. He has been talking about one subject from the end of chapter 23, through the whole of chapter 24, and into the beginning of chapter 25.

Let's back-track to chapter 23 where Jesus says, "For I tell you, you will not see me again, until you say, 'Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord' ". But the people **were** seeing Jesus at that very moment...He was standing right there in front of them. When Jesus spoke to them saying, 'You will not see me again, until...', He was telling them that He would be leaving them, and then coming back.

In chapter 24, the disciples ask Jesus, 'When will these things be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?' The disciples already understood that Jesus would come again. Verse 27 tells us, 'For as the lightning comes from the east and shines as far as the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man appearing in the heavens. Therefore, you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect'. One theme permeates: *Jesus will come again.*

J. Elsworth Kalas in *Parables From The Backside*, recounts the story of a farmer who asks, " *What are you going to plant in the spring, Jake? Corn?*"

Jake replies, " *Nope, I'm scared of the corn borer.*"

" *O yes*", says the farmer. " *Then will you be planting potatoes?*"

And Jake's reply, "*Nope, too much danger of potato bugs.*"

The farmer is at a loss for words, so he asks, "*Then what **are** you going to plant?*"

Jake says, "*Nothing!!! I'm going to play it safe.*"

I must confess that every time I read this parable, I wonder if Jesus had people like me in mind, since I am not a good financial investor. My investor gene is not that of a risk-taker. I would not even be as adventurous as the third servant, since putting money in the ground might have its dangers...there might be earthquakes or mud-slides, or dogs might find it, or even a person! You get the picture.

But is this parable about risk taking, and if so, who is the one taking the risk? Perhaps you think the master is guilty of giving extravagantly? The value of the funds to be invested was quite substantial, considering that ONE talent was the equivalent of fifteen years of a labourer's wage. Isn't the master foolish then, to have entrusted such great wealth to the servants, and then disappearing from the horizon?

Some believe that the master represents Christ, who announces to His disciples that He is going away for a while, and that during His absence, He will entrust His disciples with such an invaluable possession as the Gospel! If this is an interpretation that you trust, should the Master not be considered a fool for trusting humanity with God's "Work"? Would it not be more cost-effective for Christ to stay longer on Earth, so the 'second coming' would arrive a little faster?

Or, is this a parable about 'risk-taking' for the *servants* and for *us*? God has entrusted us with different sets of gifts. Mother Teresa stands at one end of the spectrum, giving up everything, and taking every risk for others, in the name of God. Should we consider that the third servant was at the opposite end of the spectrum, preferring to 'play-it-safe' like our friend Jake?

The master gave the servants different investments to take care of. Here we need to reflect. Do some of us receive different rewards of grace, or does it mean that we all have different levels of **awareness** of the grace God passes to us?

In addition, the master rewarded the first two servants equally, by congratulating them for a job 'well-done', and a promise that more would be given to them. Does this imply that God does not expect us to excel, or only to act according to the grace given to each of us?

When we read that the servant who was given the least, was the most afraid, especially of the master, this detail too should be considered in context. As we heard last week, Jesus had first told a parable about ten virgins. We can see many similarities between these two parables... **Jesus will come again.** The virgins were expecting the bridegroom to come, but they didn't expect him to take so long! The bridegroom is clearly Jesus, and so, it is affirmed that '**Jesus is coming**'.

The clear message of the parable of the ten virgins is 'Be Ready'. So, for more than a chapter, Jesus has been saying, '**I will come again**'. It would be natural then, for Jesus to move on to answer the question, 'What does it mean to be ready?' And it is the parable of the talents that answers that question. When Jesus says, 'For **it** will be like...' we now understand that the 'it', is the **second coming**. That is the context of this parable...

So, to recap - the man with the servants who goes on a journey, is Jesus, and the servants are us...now to the talents... How can we interpret the term 'talent' in today's setting? Luke 16:11 says: 'If you have not been faithful with worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches?' Here Jesus is talking about material wealth and He expects us to look after it, even in the 21st century.

In Matthew 13:10 & 11, the disciples ask Jesus, 'Why do you speak in parables?' He tells them, 'You have been given the knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them (those not in the inner circle), it has not been given'. In the Letter to the Corinthians, Paul describes himself and the other apostles as 'stewards of the mysteries of God'. All Christians throughout history have now been entrusted with that knowledge.

So, talents also refer to spiritual wealth – the precious knowledge of the gospel that followers of Jesus have. The parable isn't specific, but it's probably best to assume that Jesus expects us to be faithful and responsible with *both*.

The parallel to the master giving his servants money, is that Jesus gives us 'resources'. Just as the master didn't tell the servants what to do with the money, Jesus doesn't tell us what to do with the resources He gives us.

The master goes away, as will Jesus. He will ascend to heaven and no longer be present on earth. The story concludes with Jesus saying, **'After a long time the master of those servants came'**. Note the *'After a long time'*. Some people say that the early church expected Jesus to come back very soon. But in this parable Jesus said, in effect, that He would come back after a **long** time.

The danger is that we completely forget that He's coming back, but He will, and then what happens? The servants who conducted wise business transactions and increased the money they've been given, were rewarded with greater responsibility.

No kudos to the third servant who made no investment whatsoever in his future, and just buried the money. He is told, 'You wicked and slothful servant!' The master also asks him, 'Why didn't you at least put the money in the bank, and I could have got some interest?' It seems that the master would have been satisfied with that. But nothing at all? That won't do. The third servant's talent is taken away from him, and given to the servant who had five. Finally, they take the lazy servant and throw him into outer darkness.

And so I ask again, "How does the parable apply to us?" When the Master gave the talents to the three servants, they didn't know what would happen when the Master came back. But we know what the result was. The parable shows us our two possible outcomes...we can be rewarded, or we can be thrown into outer darkness. I know my choice!

So, let's replace the servants with ourselves. What would you do if the Master gave you five talents...or two talents...or one talent? Might you think, 'I really don't want the responsibility', or perhaps, 'I haven't got the time to look after your money'. Perhaps your reaction might be, 'That sounds like fun. I like the idea of getting a 'well done', and greater reward...Which category would you put yourself in? Let's be part of a 'let's give it a go' group?

Earlier I asked you to hypothetically insert yourselves into the parable as the servants, but it's not a hypothetical. The reality is that we **are** those servants, all of us. We are already in the parable of the talents. God has already given us all sorts of resources. We need to reflect on what we **are** doing. When the master comes back, will He say, 'Well done, good and faithful servant'? Will he give us greater responsibility? That outcome is there if we want it!

This parable shows how God treats us, how He reacts to us, and how we treat His blessings. The principle never changes. God is still the Master, and when He passes His talents on to us, He is, in essence, saying, "Invest what I have given you and see what will happen!"

Every one of us has unique talents and gifts, even in our senior years! Will we use them or lose them? Retirement represents an unparalleled opportunity to develop untapped talents. Some of the greatest works in the arts, literature and other fields have come from people over 70. Frank Lloyd Wright, the famous American architect, completed 1/3 of his life's work, between the ages of 80 & 92.

It's easier to grow old if we are neither bored nor boring. Projects are vital to our mental health, and there is no limit to realizing our potential. These are the years when we have more time to expand our horizons, because we are free from most routines. If we take the time to look inward, we may be surprised by our own creativity and ingenuity. Who knows! We may even experience a rebirth of ideas and amaze ourselves by newfound gifts.

LET US PRAY...

Generous provider of all good gifts, rekindle within us latent and buried talents so often neglected in earlier life.

May we find, at this stage in our life, the creative person You always knew us to be.

AMEN