Get Out Your Shovel

A meditation on Matthew 25: 14 – 30

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How you hear this parable may say much about whether you have ever been encouraged to dialogue with scripture, talk back to the text, question the writings. (Yes, you can do that – it is an ancient, and holy Jewish practice.)

How you hear this parable may say much about what you have been taught about power structures, and your relationship to them. Do you see yourself closer to the top or the bottom of the socio-economic ladder? Or maybe you’re not a fan of ladders at all.

How you hear this parable may uncover what you expect to experience when your life on this earth draws to an end. Are you working yourself to the bone in hopes of hearing “Well done, good and faithful servant?” Or do you live in fear that you have wasted the little you have been given and that you will be thrown into the outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth”?

How do you hear this parable?

Do you *like* this parable?

Because frankly, if you take this parable at face value, you and I have very different understandings of who God is and what Jesus hoped to do while he walked among us.

What if this parable has the potential to empower us in the ways of the kin-dom, ways that have nothing to do with tangible wealth or our natural abilities, our talents?

If we take this parable at face value, here’s what we have:

* A slave-owner, not at all uncommon in Jesus’ day
* 2 “wise” (And I’m defining “wise” as accepting of society’s norms) but enslaved persons who bow and scrape and kiss the - feet – of their master, so grateful that he demonstrates faith in them
* 1 “foolish” (foolish as distrustful of society’s norms) enslaved person who is so afraid of the master that he can’t do the basic and minimal work that has been given to him

Within this framework, the two wise ones, entrusted with massive amounts of the master’s wealth, do some very savvy day trading and double the master’s money. The master beams with pride. They get to share the master’s “joy,” whatever that may mean.

The “foolish” one grabs his shovel, digs a nice hole in some hidden spot, and hides his portion in the ground. This foolish person then “blames” the master for his inability to increase his earnings, arguing that he was too afraid to take a risk with what he had been given. He was afraid of the master, a “hard man.” He even accuses the master of making money without doing any work himself, reaping what he does not sow, and harvesting where he does not plant. The master has no time for this disrespectful, disobedient behavior. He takes the money from him, gives it to the first wise person and banishes this foolish one from his sight. And I wonder if it’s the master’s ego or the master’s bank account that are more offended by this third enslaved person.

So, if we take this parable at face value, the moral of the story, as given to us by Matthew, (verse 29) is this:

*Those who have much will receive more, and they will have more than they need. But as for those who don’t have much, even the little bit they have will be taken away from them.*

You can find many defenses for a straightforward interpretation of this text. Some scholars focus on the abundance of the story since one talent was equal to 15 – 20 years worth of a day laborer’s wages. (In Jesus’s day, “talents” were not coins or small wads of cash.  They were hefty precious metals (usually gold or silver) that weighed somewhere between 80 and 130 pounds. Debie Thomas/Journey with Jesus.) That is a ridiculous amount of money to give to an enslaved person. So, they say, that is how abundantly God gives grace to us. But can you truly waste grace? Does this imply that if we fear God, we will end up wasting the grace that has been offered to us? I know I frequently do not live into the fullness of what grace has to offer me in this life, but this is an apocalyptic parable, which makes this option very problematic.

Others point to intangible gifts which God has given to each of us, and they would call us to put our talents to work for God’s kin-dom. (English word for talent has its origins in this Greek word.) Again, there is nothing wrong with this idea on its own – each of us had unique abilities and we see the amazing and transformational ministry that takes place when we work together in God’s name. But, again, this is an apocalyptic parable, so do we have to earn our way into God’s realm by turning our talents into even bigger, grander talents?? Is that how it works? And does God really toss people out if they are too afraid to try? As someone who knows what a fear of failure can do to you, I don’t think this is the God I have known, nor the God I want to know.

It feels too much like works righteousness. Too much like prosperity Gospel – God will make you rich! I’ve never heard God say that. I certainly can’t say there is any evidence in the text to support that idea. If it were true, why didn’t Jesus spend his life wearing golden sandals, while reclining in a litter carried by his disciples?

Who was Jesus addressing when he told this story?

*Debie Thomas: Journey with Jesus: How did the elite amass that kind of wealth?  They lent money to the farming poor at exorbitant interest, and systematically stripped those debtors of their land.  Often the people who took such loans — at rates between 60 and 200% — did so out of desperation, putting their fields up as collateral in last-ditch efforts to save their livelihoods.  Inevitably, their efforts would fail.  Drought would hit, or a debtor would grow ill, or a crop would yield too little.  At that point, the staggering interest rates a farmer agreed to would kick in and force foreclosure, and the poor man would have no choice but to surrender his ancestral land, watch as the wealthy elite repurposed his fields for profit, and join the multitudes of landless day laborers who couldn't know from day to day where their bread would come from.*

And yes, slavery did exist. Some even sold themselves into slavery when they had incurred debts they could not pay. This is the reality of the people listening to Jesus tell this story.

So now imagine the listeners.

“There once was a master…” and the listeners don’t boo…they may all work for masters, too. But they do catch one another’s eye for they wonder what kind of master this will be. “He gave his possessions to his slaves…” and they we hear some applause, some cheers. “Who ever heard of a master like that?” They whisper to one another. “That must be heaven!” says another. The parable continues…and they learn that all these management level slaves do not receive the same amount of the master’s possessions. The master has dispersed them based on their ability, their ability to turn a profit. The listeners cross their arms over their chests; they grow concerned. They wonder where they would land on this master’s spectrum of ability. The first two work the system, while the third hides his in the ground…who has made the wiser choice? The ones who took a risk or the one who played it safe?

The first person doubled the master’s wealth…the second one, does the same. Theologian William Herzog writes, “*Who knows how many fields they seize, how many farmers they impoverish, how many families they destroy?  It doesn't matter: they fulfill the bottom line.  They make a profit.”* At this point, Jesus’ listeners may be growing angry. Their friends, their family members, they themselves have been on the receiving end of this oppression. They are well aware that those who play the system are rewarded.

And then the third? What will happen to him? How horribly will he be treated? Jesus’ audience knows the ending. They will be fully prepared for the banishing, the excluding, the suffering that is awaiting the third slave.

What they don’t expect, is that he will be a “whistle-blower.” When this third and fool hardy person opens his mouth, it isn’t to apologize, and it isn’t to beg for mercy. It is to call out the injustice of the master. He steps up and looks into the master’s face. His head is not hanging down, he isn’t mumbling. He speaks loudly and clearly so that others can hear!

“You are a hard man!” And Jesus’ audience cheers! “You harvest grain where you haven’t sown. You gather crops where you haven’t spread seed.” And the crowd is jubilant!

So I was afraid. And I hid my valuable coin in the ground. Here, you have what’s yours.’

And the master agrees with him. It’s how the game is played.

“Not afraid but fearless!” yell the people listening to this story. They know he chose a path that leads to suffering. They know the risk he has taken. But they remember what Jesus had said when he gathered his disciples on the side of the mountain.

**3**“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

**4**“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

**5**“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

**6**“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

**7**“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

**8**“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

**9**“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

**10**“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

**11**“Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely[[b](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew+5&version=NRSV&interface=print#fen-NRSV-23246b)] on my account. **12**Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

And so, they trust that the moral of the story is not for them. In fact it might just be the punch line, said with a wink and a smile. For Jesus came not to condemn the world, and certainly not to condemn those who are afraid to use their gifts, those who are appalled by the world’s injustices, those who have suffered enough – no, Jesus came not to condemn the world, but Jesus came that the world might be saved through him. John 3: 17.

Let’s do a quick swap out. The master gives the first slave, 5 bags of figs and 5 bags of pomegranates. The master gives the second slave, 2 bags of dates and 3 bags of challah. The master gives the third slave 1 bag of pomegranates. The first and second slaves trade their items for other things…well done. They are able to make a profit. We won’t ask how. The only trouble is their items won’t last long…they will be eaten or used up in some way. The third slave grabs their trusty shovel, buries the treasure, planting the seeds in the ground, far beyond the walls of the master’s property. The seeds grow and flourish, becoming lush pomegranate trees, providing delight for all who discover. Providing delight for generations to come. Well done, good and faithful servant, enter into the Creator’s joy.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

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