

The Parable of the Talents that we have in our gospel reading is one of the most troubling and confusing passages in the Bible. In times past biblical scholars tried to find meaning behind every teaching and every passage. They worked really hard with parables like this one to make sense of it. But if they were honest, nothing added up; not even close.

In more recent times biblical scholars have been more comfortable leaving confusing passages in their confusing state and saying either that we'll never know what was truly meant, or perhaps this story is getting at something much deeper than the story line itself. I am of the belief that the Parable of the Talents as we have it in Matthew is in this category.

I want to point out several of its unfixable problems, but before I do I want to note that a version of this parable also shows up in Luke's gospel. It's Luke 19:12-27. The details are different and the meaning is different. The whole parable is still challenging but it makes some sense. Generally biblical scholars have used Luke's version of the parable to interpret

the version in Matthew. But whatever the reason why we have two versions, Matthew's version needs to be able to speak for itself for it teaches something different in Matthew.

So Jesus tells this story of a man who goes on a journey and summoned some slaves and entrusted money to them. This would be a common practice in those days as slaves often held great power and responsibility on behalf of their masters. The money that is given is a talent. Now there's no current exchange rate for talents into dollars, but by my calculations it's something over three-quarters of a million dollars. So, the first slave receives four to five million dollars. The second slave receives one and a half to two million dollars. And the third slave receives something a little under a million dollars.

I don't know about you, but these amounts are not pocket change in my annual budget. We're talking about a lot of money!

We have to remember the economy in those days. It was largely stagnant. Inflation did not really exist. Today we see wealth as a pie of ever growing size. In those days wealth was

seen as a limited sized pie. If I wanted my slice to be a bit bigger it meant someone else's slice got smaller. This is one of the reasons why receiving interest on investments was considered so unethical, at least by the Jewish people. To receive interest meant that you were gaining without putting forth labor to earn it. You were making your slice of the pie bigger from someone else's work.

Our economy is very different today and we don't think that way, but you have to keep that thought in mind as we move forward in this parable.

After a long time the master returns and he wants to settle accounts with these slaves. The first one has taken, let's say 5 million dollars, and turned it into 10 million dollars for his master. The second one has taken two million dollars and turned it into four million. Did these guys actually go out and earn that much money? Did they labor for it? No. They got it by exploiting the labor of others. To have a parallel with today let's say these guys invested in sweat shops with child labor, internet pornography, and sex trafficking. In other words, this

is filthy dirty scheming and a lot of people are getting exploited.

Now, all biblical scholars say that the master in this parable represents Jesus. And the delay is the time we live in now - the time between Jesus' leaving at the ascension and Jesus' return at the end of time. What do you expect Jesus to say to these unethical scoundrels and their dirty business deals? You'd expect something like, "You disgust me. Get out of my sight! Take the money and give it back to the people who earned it."

Is that what happens in the parable?

Now to the slave who buried his master's money. We learn later that his master is a cruel and harsh man. He reaps where he did not sow and he gathered where he did not scatter seed. In other words, the master is a thief - and given the amount of money he has to throw around we can assume he has friends in high places who manipulate the justice system to overlook his crimes.

By all ethical and legal standards the slave who buried the money did the right thing. He was unwilling to perpetuate his cruel master's exploitation of others. He saw in other people dignity and integrity. When he was given power by his master he safeguarded it until his master's return. His master received back what was his - clean, honest, fair.

What happens to this slave for being a decent man with ethics?

Do you see why this parable is so troubling? Some troubling parables like the Prodigal Son have a lot of unethical behavior that can reveal deeper truths. This one doesn't.

If you try to interpret this parable at just about any level you end up with the teaching that God rewards the brash and bold for their unethical exploitation of others. The good get sent to hell. And there's no place for grace in this at all - it is entirely works based. You have to earn your way to heaven. There is no place for grace or mercy.

So what do we make of it? The usual interpretations of this parable that you should use the God given talents you have rather than just sitting on them comes from the version of the parable in Luke. We overlay that interpretation upon this one because we just can't stomach what this one really teaches.

If this is scripture, then what's its purpose? No one knows exactly what the gospel writer intended for it. I have to turn to the thoughts of biblical commentator Eugene Boring, as you may notice I often turn to his thoughts when making sense of these things. He writes, "...Matthew had less respect for logical consistency and more appreciation for imaginative, provocative sayings than many of his modern [readers]." He goes on to say that we shouldn't strain our brains to make Matthew more consistent than he was interested in being. (New Interpreter's Bible, Volume VIII, Pg. 457)

I think Matthew has deliberately caused confusion in our brains as he relays this parable from Jesus. That may sound like an odd thing to say about the Bible, but look at the bigger picture. Chapters 24 and 25 in Matthew are all about the end of

time. It is a confusing and complex subject, and one we aren't comfortable with at all. It causes fear in some people. In scientifically minded people it all sounds like silly myths. (That's not a recent development. It sounded that way in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century too.)

I'm going to skip a lot of interpretive steps as to how I get to this conclusion and just say that Matthew is not afraid to bring up dark and uncomfortable truths. We believe that we live in an in between time; the time between Jesus' leaving and his return. He promised to be with us always, but all too often he feels too far away, too nebulous for our liking. More often we feel abandoned by God than held by God.

Similarly, what are we to do in the meantime? Should we sit around and wait; be like the slave who buried the money? That doesn't sound right. But those slaves who worked with the money... isn't that teaching that we are saved by our works and our successes? What would have happened if they failed and lost the money? How can God be both judge and merciful savior to us?

We do Matthew's gospel a disservice when we read it the way we do in worship. We dissect Chapters 24 and 25 into little pieces and analyze them over time. We shouldn't do that. If you ever read through Matthew's gospel you'll discover that 24 and 25 hit you like two freight trains colliding head on and every piece of comfort and logic you ever thought you had with faith goes flying everywhere. Those chapters make no sense and contract everything you thought you knew about God.

In the minds of many current biblical interpreters, and I'll count myself among them, that's exactly what Matthew wanted to happen in his readers.

Why? Because look at what happens next. You only thought you were confused. These chapters are the prelude to the crucifixion.

Matthew doesn't want you getting too cozy and comfortable with the cross. Don't tame it. Don't understand it. Don't domesticate it. It's messy business.

And so is life.

Maybe I'm working too hard at interpreting it, but I think Chapters 24 and 25, including The Parable of the Talents, jar us into the all too real aspects of living a life of faith.

It's not easy. It's not pretty. It's hard. And when the Bible writers can show they know it - you know that Jesus knows it too.

May you allow the Bible to fill you with dis-ease when it needs to. Not the dis-ease of guilt for doing something sinful or wrong. But the dis-ease of raising your deepest fears and uncertainties into your conscious mind. And then know how deeply God can see into you, and impossibly still love you.

Amen