

THE PARABLE
OF THE TALENT
~REVIEWED~



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Cover: Emperor Tiberius' Denarii

As a subscriber to the Biblical Archaeology Society we get the Bible History Daily. Usually it deals with interesting issues involving biblical details, answers and debates. For example, the latest issues written about by their staff were: “Where Was Jesus Born?”; “When Was Jesus Born—B.C. or A.D.?” “Ancient Roman Garum (fish sauce) Factory Discovered at Ashkelon.” etc. The one that attracted our attention this time was: “What Does the Parable of the Talents Mean?, Looking at Matthew 25:14–30 with ancient eyes.”

Naturally we reviewed the texts in both Matthew and Luke since we have always thought that the servant who received the one talent he was entrusted with taken away from him and given to the guy who used the five he was given and earned five more, was treated badly by the rich man they (all three) were enslaved to.

Fortunately we were able to find two other opinions on the meaning of the parable other than the one from BAS. Wikipedia offers one which we will consider a more secular point of view, another from Bishop Robert Barron which we should consider the accepted Catholic understanding of the parable preached in the church. Of course, there are obviously many other opinions but we feel that these three adequately serve the purposes of difference.

We will briefly present each opinion from material provided on the web, but first we will provide the text from the New Jerusalem Bible

NJB (Matt.25:14-30)

'It is like a man about to go abroad who summoned his servants and entrusted his property to them. 15 To one he gave five talents, to another two, to a third one, each in proportion to his ability. Then he set out on his journey. 16 The man who had received the five talents promptly went and traded with them and made five more. 17 The man who had received two made two more in the same way. 18 But the man who had received one went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money. 19 Now a long time afterwards, the master of those servants came back and went through his accounts with them. 20 The man who had received the five talents came forward bringing five more. "Sir," he said, "you entrusted me with five talents; here are five more that I have made." 21 His master said to him, "Well done, good and trustworthy servant; you have shown you are trustworthy in small things; I will trust you with greater; come and join in your master's happiness." 22 Next the man with the two talents came forward. "Sir," he said, "you entrusted me with two talents; here are two more that I have made." 23 His master said to him, "Well done, good and trustworthy servant; you have shown you are trustworthy in small things; I will trust you with greater; come and join in your master's happiness." 24 Last came forward the man who had the single talent. "Sir," said he, "I had heard you were a hard man, reaping where you had not sown and gathering where you had not scattered; 25 so I was afraid, and I went off and hid your talent in the ground. Here it is; it was yours, you have it back." 26 But his master answered him, "You wicked and lazy servant! So you knew that I reap where I have not sown and gather where I have not scattered? 27 Well then, you should have deposited my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have got my money back with interest. 28 So now, take the talent from him and give it to the man who has

the ten talents. 29 For to everyone who has will be given more, and he will have more than enough; but anyone who has not, will be deprived even of what he has. 30 As for this good-for-nothing servant, throw him into the darkness outside, where there will be weeping and grinding of teeth.”

BAS:

Richard L. Rohrbaugh examines the Parable of the Talents’ meaning in his Biblical Views column [“Reading the Bible Through Ancient Eyes”](#) in the September/October 2016 issue of *Biblical Archaeology Review*. Although the story itself is fairly straightforward, Rohrbaugh argues that the Parable of the Talents’ meaning is less clear. An ancient audience would have interpreted it differently than a modern one.

The Talents’ parable has typically been interpreted by the Western church as being about proper investment: Jesus’ disciples are urged to use their abilities and gifts to serve God—without reservation and without fear of taking risks. Rohrbaugh, however, argues that the Talents’ parable is all about exploitation. Whereas a modern, Western audience would applaud the first two slaves for trading and investing well, an ancient audience would have approved of the third slave’s behavior and condemned that of the first two slaves because they profited *at the expense of others*. Rohrbaugh explains: [G]iven the “limited good” outlook of ancient Mediterranean cultures, seeking “more” was considered morally wrong. Because the pie was “limited” and already all distributed, anyone getting “more” meant someone else got less. Thus honorable people did not try to get more, and those who did were automatically considered thieves: To have gained, to have

accumulated more than one started with, is to have taken the share of someone else.

This interpretation of the Parable of the Talents' meaning casts the actions of the first two slaves as shameful and that of the third slave as honorable.

The scenario played out in the Talents' parable (Matthew 25:14–30)—of a master leaving his property in control of his slaves—was not uncommon. In the ancient world, greedy people who did not want to get accused of profiting at someone else's expense, which was considered shameful, would delegate their business to slaves, who were held to a different standard. Rohrbaugh explains the ancients' reasoning: "Shameful, even greedy, behavior could be condoned in slaves because slaves had no honor nor any expectation of it."

Accordingly, in the Talents' parable, the master leaves his money with his slaves in the hope that they will exploit the system and increase his riches. The first two slaves do just this, but the third "honorably refrains from taking anything that belongs to the share of another."

This slave also does not invest his money at the bank, through which he would have earned interest. The master further reprimands the slave for not doing this, but Rohrbaugh points out: "Seeking interest from another Israelite was forbidden by the Torah (Deuteronomy 23:19–20), and, elsewhere in Luke, Jesus says that we should lend 'expecting nothing in return' (Luke 6:35)."

Should then the actions of the third slave be condemned or lauded? According to Rohrbaugh, reading Matthew 25:14–30 with ancient eyes suggests that the third slave is the only one who behaved honorably in the Talents' parable.

WIKIPEDIA:

As a critique of religious leaders[edit]

Joachim Jeremias believed that the original meaning of the parable was not an ethical one about every man. Instead, he saw it as aimed at the scribes who had withheld "from their fellow men a due share in God's gift." [24] In his view, Jesus is saying that these scribes will soon be brought to account for what they have done with the Word of God which was entrusted to them. [24]

Jeremias also believed that in the life of the early church the parable took on new meaning, with the merchant having become an allegory of Christ, so that "his journey has become the ascension, his subsequent return ... has become the Parousia (second coming), which ushers his own into the Messianic banquet." [24]

As social critique[edit]

In *Parables as Subversive Speech: Jesus as Pedagogue of the Oppressed* (1994), William R. Herzog II presents a liberation theology interpretation of the "Parable of the Talents", wherein the absentee landlord reaps where he didn't sow, and the third servant is a whistle-blower who has "unmasked the 'joy of the master' for what it is — the profits of exploitation squandered in wasteful excess." [25] Hence, the third servant is punished for speaking the truth, and not for failing to make a profit. From the critical perspective of liberation theology, the message of the "Parable of the Talents" is that man must act in solidarity with other men when confronting social, political, and economic injustices. [25]

To describe how scientists are awarded authorial credit for their work, the sociologist Robert K. Merton applied the term The Matthew effect of accumulated advantage, in which the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. With the "Parable of the Talents", Merton metaphorically described the system of authorial rewards used, among the community of scientists, whereby famous scientists usually are awarded credit that is disproportionately greater than their contributions, while less-famous scientists are awarded lesser credit than is merited by their contributions; see also Stigler's law of eponymy: "No scientific discovery is named after its original discoverer." [26]

Depictions in the arts[edit]

The "Parable of the Talents" has been depicted by artists such as Rembrandt, Jan Luyken, and Matthäus Merian. In literature, the *Threepenny Novel* (1934), by Bertolt Brecht (1895–1956), presents a social critique of the parable as an ideological tool of capitalist exploitation of the worker and of society. [27]

In religious music, the hymn "Slave of God, Well Done!", by John Wesley, notably alludes to the "Parable of the Talents" (Matthew 25:23), which was written on the occasion of the death of George Whitefield (1714–1770), the English Anglican cleric who was instrumental to the First Great Awakening (ca. 1731–55) in Britain and in the American colonies. [28]

The hymn "Slave of God, Well Done!" begins thus:

Slave of God, well done!

Thy glorious warfare's past;

The battle's fought, the race is won,

And thou art crowned at last. [29]

Bishop Barron:

The attendance at our daily Mundelein Seminary on Labor Day weekend was sparse. Many of the students had gone home while others were on a special tour of Chicago churches. The celebrant and preacher for the Sunday Mass was Fr. Robert Schoenstene, our veteran Old Testament professor. Fr. Schoenstene offered the best interpretation I've ever heard of a particularly puzzling parable of the Lord, and I wanted to make sure his reading got a wider audience.

The parable in question is the one concerning the rich man who gives talents to three of his servants and then sets out on a journey (Matt. 25:14-30). Upon his return, he assesses the situation and discovers that the servant to whom he had given five talents had invested them fruitfully and that the servant to whom he had given three talents had done the same. But he finds, to his chagrin, that the slave to whom he had entrusted one talent had simply buried the wealth and had garnered neither gain nor interest. Angered, he orders that the one talent be taken from the timid servant and given to the servant who had invested most boldly.

And then comes the devastating moral lesson: "For to everyone who has, more will be given and he will grow rich; but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away."

The standard reading of this story—on display in thousands of sermons and fervorinos—is that the talents symbolize gifts and abilities that God has given to us and that he expects us to "spend" generously or "invest" wisely. This interpretation is supported by the fairly accidental relationship that obtains between "talent" in the ancient Biblical sense of the term and "talent" in ordinary English today. Fr. Schoenstene specified that a talent in ancient times was a measure of something

particularly weighty, usually silver or gold. A single talent might represent as much as 50 pounds of precious metal and, as such, was not something that one carried around in one's pocket. We might make a comparison between a talent and a unit of gold kept at Fort Knox, or an ingot of silver preserved in a safe deposit box.

What the contemporary reader will likely miss, and what the ancient Jewish reader would have caught immediately, is the connection to heaviness: a talent was weighty, and five talents was massively heavy. Heaviness would have brought to mind the heaviest weight of all, which was the kabod of Yahweh. That term was rendered in Greek as *doxa* and in Latin as *gloria*, both of which carry the connotation of luminosity, but the basic sense of the Hebrew word is heaviness, *gravitas*.

And this kabod Yahweh was to be found in the Jerusalem Temple, resting upon the mercy seat within the Holy of Holies. Therefore, what was heaviest (most glorious) of all was the mercy of God, which abided in infinite, inexhaustible abundance in the Holy Temple.

In light of these clarifications, we can read Jesus' parable with fresh eyes. The talents given to the three servants are not so much monetary gifts or personal capacities; **they are a share in the mercy of God, a participation in the weightiness of the divine love.** But since mercy is always directed to the other, these "talents" are designed to be shared. In point of fact, they will increase precisely in the measure that they are given away.

The problem with the timid servant who buried his talent is not that he was an ineffective venture capitalist but that he fundamentally misunderstood the nature of what he had been

given. The divine mercy—received as a pure gift—is meant to be given to others as a pure gift. Buried in the ground, that is to say, hugged tightly to oneself as one’s own possession, such a talent necessarily evanesces. And this is why the master’s seemingly harsh words should not be read as the punishment of an angry God but as an expression of spiritual physics: **the divine mercy will grow in you only inasmuch as you give it to others.** To “have” the kabod Yahweh is precisely not to have it in the ordinary sense of the term.

What comes to mind here is the most famous of all of Jesus’ parables, namely, the story of the Prodigal Son. Using a term that also carried a monetary sense in ancient times, the younger son says, “Father give me my share of the ousia (substance or wealth) that is coming to me. Notice how in one sentence, he manages to mention himself three times! The father gives away his ousia, for that is all he knows how to do, but the foolish son squanders the money in short order. The spiritual lesson is the same: the divine ousia is a gift and it can be “had” only inasmuch as it becomes a gift for others. When we try to cling to it as a possession, it disappears.

How wonderful that these ancient stories, once we unpack their spiritual significance, still sing to us today.

Conclusion:

Since the gospels were gleaned from various sources including hearsay as well as direct witness and edited in the early church by the followers of the original apostles to suit their hearers, it would be difficult to attach absolute meaning to every pericope. Much of the original material came from stories that were passed on orally from generation to generation. Even the direct writing of Matthew and John the evangelist are subject to

question by many of today's biblical scholars. Henry Wansbrough editor of The New Jerusalem Bible has given us a wonderful book: *Introducing the New Testament*, which in our view is the best in the genera. Here is a clip:

“It is significant for what would become the gospels that from the earliest times the memories of Jesus were always understood against the background of scripture. This is evident both in the first two accounts of evangelization (Lk. 24.27; Acts 8.35) and in Paul's memorized text (the text stresses that the events were ‘according to the scriptures’, 1 Cor. 15.3 and 4); it will be reflected in the gospels. Memorization was extremely important in education at that time, when books were rare and expensive, whole passages being memorized for use as examples of style. It has been suggested that, when the Twelve thought it would not be right for them ‘to neglect the word of God so as to give out food’ (Acts 6.2), they were unwilling to put aside their work of garnering and developing the traditions about Jesus. The teachers in the early Christian communities (Rom. 12.7; 1 Cor. 12.28–9, etc) will also no doubt have engaged in this process. Our earliest Christian writers tell of Papias, Bishop of Hierapolis at the end of the first century, eagerly listening to the traditions about Jesus from the elders or those who had known the Twelve, and – a few years later – of Polycarp of Smyrna passing on what he had learned from John ‘concerning the Lord, his mighty works and his teaching’ (Eusebius, H.E. 3.39.3; 5.20.4). At some stage it must have been thought appropriate that such traditions should be gathered together, and this is how the gospels came to be written.

Wansbrough, H. (2015). *Introducing the New Testament*. London: Bloomsbury.

Without being too critical we have a little different understanding of the meaning behind the interesting parable recounted by Matthew.

“In the New Testament, the term "talent" meant something very different than it does today. The talents Jesus Christ spoke of in the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant (Matthew 18:21-35) and the Parable of the Talents (Matthew 25:14-30) referred to the largest unit of currency at the time. For example, the ten thousand talents owed by the unforgiving servant would come to at least 204 metric tons of silver, reflecting an astronomical sum of 60 million denarii.”

“Thus, a talent represented a rather large sum of money. According to New Nave's Topical Bible, one who possessed five talents of gold or silver was a multimillionaire by today's standards. Some calculate the talent in the parables to be equivalent to 20 years of wages for the common worker. Other scholars estimate more conservatively, valuing the New Testament talent somewhere between \$1,000 to \$30,000 dollars today.”

“Needless to say (but let's say it anyway), knowing the actual meaning, weight, and value of a term like talent can help give context, deeper understanding, and better perspective when studying the Scriptures.”

Source: Learning Religions Blog, Mary Fairchild.

Our view/

According to the story, a rich traveler placed much of his wealth in the hands of his stewards to keep his holdings safe from being plundered while he was away. He gave all three of them no specific instructions as to what to do with his “valuables.” Now, let us consider substituting the weight of his talents of gold or silver with the abstract idea of the word “*trust*” proportionate to each man’s ability to be trusted.

He trusted the first steward about three times more than he trusted the second, and the third man half as much as the second. Then off he went.— He seems to have treated each of them fairly according to their worthiness to handle his trusting nature while he was absent, even though they all knew he was a “hard man” who “reaped where he did not sow.” Still the four most common elements of trusting someone are based on their competence, reliability, integrity and the ability to communicate, so he trusted the three proportionately. They all owed him their loyalty for sure because their livelihood was entirely depended on him, so he required their trust of him too. Without him their very existence was not viable. Their need was also to utterly trust in him.

Okay, our intrepid traveler returns.— The steward he trusted most returned his trust by doubling the returning trust (faith) in him. The second also returned his trust one hundred percent. The third showed *mis-trust* to start with by clutching the trust he had been given and not returning the Master’s expectation of the third servant’s trust in him.

One is reminded of the old Baltimore Catechism's answer to the question: "Why did God make us"? Answer: "To love, honor and serve him in this world, and be happy with him forever in the next." *Trusting in the grace of the Father through the Son in the Spirit is our faith.* The full realization that we are not perfect but are given to trust in God as best we are proportionately able is a requirement of a faithful, trustworthy life.

Great saints, like Augustine, Theresa of Lisieux, Ignatius of Loyola and many others, were troubled with terrifying scruples about perfection, until they were able to trust in God and rest in the comfort of his trust in us.

To close this short essay we would like to copy a portion of St Ignatius' autobiography and his personal battle with scrupulosity, (a lack of trust in goodness of God) what we are now prone to call "Obsessive Compulsive Behavior" fed by fear—most often, irrational fear keeping many away from church and especially away from the sacraments.

From The Autobiography of Ignatius of Loyola

At this time he became acquainted with some holy persons who manifested great confidence in him, and gladly conversed with him; for though he had, as yet, little knowledge of spiritual things, still he spoke with great fervor on religious subjects, and incited his hearers to make greater progress in the way of God's service. Among those holy persons who dwelt at Manresa, there was one lady well advanced in years who had long been given to the service of God, and who was so well known in many places in Spain that his Catholic Majesty, the

King of Spain, had desired her presence on one occasion in order to take counsel with her about certain projects that he had in his mind. This lady, speaking one day to our new soldier of Christ, said to him, "Would that the Lord Jesus might appear to you some day!" Ignatius, wondering at her words, understood in a literal sense, and asked her, "What would He look like if He were to show Himself to me?"

He always persevered in his custom of approaching the Sacraments of Confession and Holy Communion every week. But herein he found a great source of anxiety on account of the scruples with which he was annoyed. For though he had written out his general confession at Montserrat, and with great diligence and care had tried to make it complete, yet he always felt that he had forgotten something in his confession, and this caused him much anxiety. Even though he should now confess it again, he received no consolation. Then he tried to find a spiritual person, who could give him relief in his trouble, but he found no one. Finally, a certain doctor who had experience in spiritual things, and who was a preacher in the church, advised him to write down anything he remembered and feared that he had not confessed. He obeyed, and even after he had confessed these sins, his scruples still continued to fill his soul, and he was constantly recalling minor details that he had not confessed.

In this way he was cruelly tormented. He knew well that these scruples caused no little harm to the spiritual life, and that it was most expedient to get rid of them, yet they continued to torture him. At times it occurred to him that it would be well if he could have his confessor command him in the name of the Lord Jesus not again to confess anything of his past sins; and

he inwardly prayed that his confessor would give him some such command, but he could not bring himself to ask him to do so.

CHAPTER III

Scruples—heavenly favors—journey to Barcelona

At last his confessor, without any suggestion on the part of the penitent, commanded him to confess nothing of his past life, except what was very clear and evident. But as he regarded everything of the past as evident, the confessor's order did not help him at all. He was in constant anxiety. At that time he lived in the Dominican monastery, in a little cell which the Fathers had allotted to him. He kept up his usual custom of praying on bended knees for seven hours a day, and scourged himself three times a day and during the night. But all this did not remove his scruples, which had been tormenting him for months. One day, when terribly tormented, he began to pray. During his prayer, he cried out to God in a loud voice: "O Lord, help me, for I find no remedy among men, nor in any creature! If I thought I could find one, no labor would seem too great to me. Show me some one! O Lord! where may I find one? I am willing to do anything to find relief."

While tortured by these thoughts, several times he was violently tempted to cast himself out of the large window of his cell. This window was quite near the place where he was praying. But since he knew that it would be a sin to take his own life, he began to pray, "O Lord, I will not do anything to offend Thee." He repeated these words frequently with his former prayer, when there came to his mind the story of a certain holy man, who, to obtain of God some favor which

he ardently desired, spent many days without food, until he obtained the favor he asked. He determined to do the same. He resolved in his heart neither to eat nor drink until God should look upon him in mercy, or until he should find himself at the point of death; then only should he eat.

This resolution was taken on a Sunday after communion, and for a whole week he neither ate nor drank anything; in the meantime he practiced his usual penances, recited the Divine Office, prayed on bended knees at the appointed times, and rose at midnight. On the following Sunday, when about to make his usual confession, as he had been in the habit of making known to his confessor everything he had done, even the smallest detail, he told him that he had not eaten anything during the past week. Hereupon his confessor bade him break his fast. Although he felt that he still had sufficient strength to continue without food, nevertheless he obeyed his confessor, and on that day and the next he was free from scruples. On the third day, however, which was Tuesday, while standing in prayer, the remembrance of his sins came back to him. One suggested another, until he passed in review, one after another, all his past sins. He then thought he ought to repeat his general confession. After these thoughts a sort of disgust seized him, so that he felt an inclination to give up the life he was leading. While in this state, God was pleased to arouse him as it were from sleep, and to relieve him of his trouble. As he had acquired some experience in the *discernment of spirits*, he profited by the lessons he had learned of God, and began to examine how that Spirit had entered into possession of his soul; then he resolved never again to speak of his past sins in confession. From that day he was free from scruples, and felt certain that it was the will of our merciful Lord to deliver him from his trouble of soul.”

The autobiography of St. Ignatius Loyola , Editor: J. F. X. O'Connor SJ: February 6, 2008 [EBook #24534] Project Gutenberg.

In Loyola's case he certainly "physically" proved the Lord's trust in him was more than justified; although beating oneself up (flagellation) seems a bit strange in our time. Once he was able to place *his trust* in God instead of an inordinate fear of him because of his former sins, only then was he able to rest in the fact that God loved *him* too, probably more so because of his repentance.

Similarly the less trustworthy steward was unable to grasp the the fact that God loved him. Honest "trust," like love, is a two way street. Trusting in God's love *of* us is as important as our love *for* God. The entire chain of events from creation,— to incarnation,—crucifixion— to resurrection; our redemption IS the salvation of mankind; for Christians of course, and for all others anonymously. The New Covenant in the blood of Christ, the Son of God, is humanity's saving grace.

16 "For this is how God loved the world: he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. 17 For God sent his Son into the world not to judge the world, but so that through him the world might be saved. 18 No one who believes in him will be judged; but whoever does not believe is judged already, because that person does not believe in the Name of God's only Son. 19 And the judgement is this: though the light has come into the world people have preferred darkness to the light because their deeds were evil. 20 And indeed, everybody who does wrong hates the

light and avoids it, to prevent his actions from being shown up; ²¹ but whoever does the truth comes out into the light, so that what he is doing may plainly appear as done in God.”

(John 3:16)

Christmas: December 25th

And the Word became flesh
and made his dwelling among us,
and we saw his glory,
the glory as of the Father's only Son,
full of grace and truth.

(John 1:14)