

Tell Me the Stories of Jesus
IN BUSINESS WITH GOD

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Thursday morning I left a voicemail for Jeff Hargrove at Four Oaks Bank. I told him I needed his help as I wrote my sermon. Would he please call me back? When Jeff returned my call, he immediately said, “I didn’t know I was in the sermon writing business now!” I told him, “You never know what you might be called on to do!”

Here’s what I asked Jeff to tell me: How much interest could you earn by putting \$348,000 in a conservative, secure investment such as a CD for twenty years? Jeff crunched the numbers based on an interest rate of .75% and said, “After twenty years, you’d have about \$400,080, or about \$52,000 of interest.” What if I invested \$1,035,000 the same way? Again, Jeff crunched the numbers and said, “About \$1,190,000, or \$155,000.” By then, Jeff had figured out which story of Jesus I was preaching about. When I said something about the third servant digging a hole and burying his master’s money in the ground, Jeff said, “With interest rates the way they are today, you might be better off putting it in the ground instead of taking it to the bank!”

If you’re wondering where the amounts of \$348,000 and \$1,035,000 came from, consider this. When the parable says, “he entrusted his property to them; to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one,” it doesn’t mean the master gave one servant the ability to play the piano, to sing well, to paint beautiful pictures, to cook delicious meals, and to teach interesting classes. It doesn’t mean the master gave the second servant impressive photography skills and the ability to play the banjo. It doesn’t mean the third servant was given a “green thumb.” When the story says the master gave his servants “talents,” it means he gave them bags of gold or, at least, lots of money.

We hear the word “talent” and we think of special abilities. In Jesus’ day, a talent **was** a LOT of money. One talent equalled 6,000 denarii. Well, if you don’t know how much a denarius was worth, that doesn’t help much. One denarius was considered to be worth a day’s wages. 6,000 denarii/one talent then equalled more or less twenty years of wages. That still doesn’t compute very well, does it?

Think about it this way:

The North Carolina minimum wage is \$7.25 per hour, which is \$58 for an eight-hour day. If you multiply \$58 a day by 6,000 days, you get \$348,000. According to the Social Security Administration’s National Average Wage Index for 2013, the aver-

age annual wage was \$44,888.16. That computes to \$21.58 an hour or \$172.64 a day. When you multiply \$172.64 by 6,000, you get \$1,035,840. So, that's where the numbers I gave Jeff to crunch came from.

Translating today's parable into today's dollars means the servant who was given five talents would have received (based on the minimum wage) \$1,740,000; the second \$696,000; and the third \$348,000. Based on the National Average Wage Index for 2013, the 5-talent servant would have received \$5,179,200; the 2-talent servant \$2,071,680; and the 1-talent servant \$1,035,840.

When the master returned and settled accounts with his servants, the 5-talent servant would have given the master \$3,480,000 (minimum wage) or \$10,358,400 (national average); the 2-talent servant would have returned \$1,392,000 (minimum wage) or \$4,143,360 (national average); but the 1-talent servant would have given his master the original amount of \$348,000 (minimum wage) or \$1,035,840 (national average). The point is, each of the servants was given a LOT of money by his master. And the master seems pretty pleased with Servant #1 and Servant #2. He apparently had been gone for long time (he must have been, since his servants had to have time to double his money). But the master wasn't particularly pleased with Servant #3: "You ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest, either \$52,000 or \$155,000 more than I gave you!"

So, is this parable about sound investing and protecting and increasing your boss's assets? Is this parable teaching Christian or biblical money management skills? Probably not, since the story doesn't tell us anything about how Servant #1 and Servant #2 doubled their master's money, and most of us aren't inclined to bury our money in the backyard.

Well, then, what does this parable have to say to us? As someone said in Bible study on Wednesday, "I think it means we're supposed to use what God has given us." Considering where this story is located in Matthew's gospel, I think that's exactly what this story is about. Chapter 25 has three parables, all of them about "the end times" or "the coming of the kingdom." The first parable is about ten bridesmaids, five of whom planned ahead and had enough oil for their lamps, five of whom were caught by surprise when the bridegroom showed up. When they rushed out to buy more oil at the eleventh hour, they were shut out of the celebration when they got back.

The third parable is about the nations appearing before the Son of Man sitting on his throne. The people are divided as sheep and goats and judged on what they did or didn't do for "one of the least of these": feeding the hungry, giving the thirsty something to drink, welcoming the stranger, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and the prisoners.

The parable of the talents is between these two stories about the coming of the kingdom. The master's departure, lengthy absence, and return "after a long time" certainly suggest Jesus' death and second coming. The master's distribution of his property (and the responsibility that went along with the bags of gold) certainly sug-

gests Jesus giving his disciples and his followers their marching orders in the Great Commission (go and baptize and make disciples and teach). The master's apportionment of his property to his servants, "to each according to his ability," sounds a lot like what the apostle Paul says about spiritual gifts: "Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. . . All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses." (1 Corinthians 12:4-7, 11)

It's tempting to feel sorry for Servant #3, the one-talent servant. After all, he didn't **lose** his master's money. He actually practiced a common, rabbi-recommended and completely acceptable strategy for protecting money: By burying his master's money in the ground, he not only saved the money but he also protected and excused himself from any responsibility for what happened to the money.

That seems to be the point of this story Jesus told — in line with the Wednesday morning observation, "we're supposed to use what God has given us": by playing it safe, Servant #3 showed his hand, how he was more concerned about himself and his own safety than using what his master had given him to care for in his absence. It seems reasonable to assume that Servant #1 and Servant #2 took some risks with what their master had entrusted to them. Wouldn't it have been interesting to hear the master's reaction and response if the story had said something like, "And the one with two talents also came forward, saying, 'Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have one and a half talents to return. I used what you gave me, and this is what I have to give you'"? Based on the master's response to Servant #3, it might not be assuming too much to think the master would have commended Servant #2 for at least **trying**, even if he lost some money.

Which is why the point of parable seems to be, "It matters what we do with what God has given us." Servant #3 said, "Master, I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground." How often do we let our fear get in the way of using what God has given us? How often are we afraid to do something with everything God has given us? How often do we make excuses for why we don't develop the gifts God gives us for service in his name and in his church and for his people?

We look around and think, "Well, those folks got five bags of gold. That's more than I've got!"

We look around and think, "What difference could my little gift possibly make?"

We look around and think, "It's too risky to use what I've been given. I'm afraid of what might happen."

We look around and think, "Nobody's asked me to use what I've been given."

We look around and think, "How does Almighty God, who can create something out of nothing, need little ole me? Who am I to think that anything I do matters to a God like that?"

What we do with what God gives each of us matters a lot. It's not what we do on our own. It's not that we accomplish great things by our own abilities. We are saved to service, given grace to respond in faith and in action, to use the grace-gifts of God. If we dig a hole and hide what God has given us — because we're afraid of what might happen if we use what God has given us and calls us to do — that's not what God wants from us, no matter how smart we may think we are being, no matter how safe we play it.

David Steinmetz, professor emeritus of Church History and Doctrine at Duke Divinity School, writes, "There is no responsible use of the gifts of God which does not involve taking risks. . . Bernard of Clairvaux observed that people who do not progress in the spiritual life, regress . . . There is no standing still, no burying of capital allowed. Martin Luther underscored Bernard's point when he described the Christian life as *semper in motu*, always in motion. Responsible discharge of my calling as a Christian and, more particularly, as an officer in the Christian church requires me to take risks for the Kingdom, risks I would rather avoid. There is no way around this danger, only a way through."¹

Imagine going to heaven and standing by God as he lovingly shows you the calendar of his plan for your earthly life. It begins with the day you are born. You see footprints walking through each day of each week of your life.

On many of those days, two sets of footprints appear. You ask, "Father, are those my footprints on the calendar every day, and is the second set of prints when you joined me?"

God answers, "No, child. The footprints that show up every day are mine. The second set of prints are when you decided to walk with me."

"Where were you going, Father?"

"To the place I had in mind for you, hoping you'd follow."

"But, Father, where are my footprints on all of those days?"

God says, "Sometimes you went back to look at old resentments and habits while I was still going forward, hoping you'd join me. Sometimes you walked away from the path and chose your own calendar instead. Other times your footprints can even be seen on another person's calendar, because you thought you liked their plan better. Sometimes you simply stopped because you wouldn't let go of something you couldn't take to the next day."

"Father, what are those golden treasure boxes on certain days?"

God says, "Those are blessings, child, that I had for you along the way. The boxes that are open are those you received. The boxes that are still closed were days you did not walk with me."

"But, Father, we ended up OK even if I didn't walk with you every day and even if I didn't open every blessing box. We ended up OK, didn't we?"

God holds you close and smiles and says, "Yes, child, we ended up OK. But, you see, OK was never what I had in mind for you."²

Let us pray: Gracious God, you have called each of us by name and equipped us with unique gifts. Help us to use them to further your mission of love and reconciliation in the world. With your help, guidance, and love, help us humbly accept the invitation to serve you, your church, and your world. Amen.

NOTES

¹David C. Steinmetz, "Matthew 25:14-30," *Interpretation* (Volume 34, No. 2, April 1980), p. 175.

²Adapted from "Following" found at www.sierravista.org/college/areyoufollowing.htm