

**Matthew 25:14-30**

<sup>14</sup>For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; <sup>15</sup>to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. <sup>16</sup>The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. <sup>17</sup>In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. <sup>18</sup>But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money. <sup>19</sup>After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. <sup>20</sup>Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, 'Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents.' <sup>21</sup>His master said to him, 'Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.' <sup>22</sup>And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, 'Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents.' <sup>23</sup>His master said to him, 'Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.' <sup>24</sup>Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, 'Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; <sup>25</sup>so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.' <sup>26</sup>But his master replied, 'You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? <sup>27</sup>Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. <sup>28</sup>So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. <sup>29</sup>For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. <sup>30</sup>As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'

*Lord of compassion and love, reveal to us the life you desire for all your children, your truth which sets us free. Amen.*

As Christians, we hold the Bible to be the living word of God. We say it is a *living word* because it speaks, and continues to speak profoundly to each generation of readers from ancient times to the present. The Bible is an ancient text which continues to speak God's truth into contemporary culture. Today's reading is a potent example of this reality.

That being said, I've always felt a little unsettled with the usual way this parable has been interpreted. For example, *we are to use our talents to the best of our ability for the sake of the kingdom of God, and God's glory. The third slave did not do this and thus did not get to enter the joy of his master, who is seen as God.*

But what if the rich land owner is not a stand-in for God? Knowing Jesus' preference for ministering to the poor and dispossessed, it is hard to see the 3<sup>rd</sup> slave cast into the outer darkness – gnashing of teeth and all – for the “sin” of not returning a profit to his master. Indeed, I do believe God wants us to make good use of the gifts we've been given, but really, would God cast us into the outer darkness if we didn't?

Another way I've struggled with this parable is the way it seems to praise the singular task of making money; a ton of money! One talent is equivalent to about 20 years wages for a laborer; that's a huge amount of money! Consider the local economy of a first century city or village. Between the first 2 slaves, 7 talents were basically removed from the local economy; a staggering/breath-taking amount of resources. Seen in human terms it's as if 140 laborers went jobless and didn't get paid for a year.

Seeing the parable in these terms shows how the 3<sup>rd</sup> slave was sort of like a non-violent resister who refused to be party to the disenfranchising of the more vulnerable members of the community. In a sense the 3<sup>rd</sup> slave “blew the whistle” on the rich who take advantage of the poor. So how did the rich get that way? Let's go back to Abraham...

God promised Abraham and his descendents – forever – a land flowing with milk and honey; it was known as the Promised Land. Moses led the people there, but it was Joshua who finally brought them across the Jordan into that Promised Land. It was to be the people's land shared among them as a perpetual holding.

After 40 years of wandering in the wilderness, the Hebrew people entered the Promised Land in the same boat, so to speak. They survived because God had fed them with manna and game, and provided water in the desert. They came into the Promised Land as equals. So how did some get so rich?

It's not hard to imagine that over the years some did better than others. Some had to borrow to survive, and if a small farmer, for example, suffered a couple years of poor yield, we can see how loans would go unpaid, and family farms lost by default.

Undoubtedly there were greedy unscrupulous characters who charged excessive interest and took advantage of the boom and bust cycle to amass large holdings of land. As the cycle continued, desperate and landless, peasants sold themselves as slave labor to land barons, perhaps like the rich man in today's parable.

The great gulf between rich and poor seems to be an ongoing reality. But consider the scale represented in our parable: At 7 talents (140 years worth of labor), the earnings of the first 2 slaves would be impossible if they were just managing a farming operation.

The scale of the parable suggests that the first 2 slaves were following in the footsteps of their master; a harsh man who, with repossessed land, reaped where he did not sow, and gathered where he did not scatter; a mercenary master who took advantage of small farmers through costly loans and foreclosures. By telling this parable I believe Jesus was shining light on the predatory practices of the wealthy, eating up the lives of the poor. Let's consider the biblical evidence:

Recall one of Jesus' critiques against the Jewish leadership: *'Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the market-places,<sup>39</sup> and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets!<sup>40</sup> They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.'* (Mark 12:38-40).

Jesus was not the first to speak out against predatory practices. The prophet Isaiah did the same:

<sup>7</sup> *For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts  
is the house of Israel,  
and the people of Judah  
are his pleasant planting;  
he expected justice,  
but saw bloodshed;  
righteousness,  
but heard a cry!*

<sup>8</sup> *Ah, you who join house to house,  
who add field to field,  
until there is room for no one but you,  
and you are left to live alone  
in the midst of the land! (Isaiah 5:7-8).*

Another warning comes from the prophet Nehemiah:

*"Let us abandon this exacting of interest. Return to them this very day their fields, their vineyards, their olive orchards, and their houses, and the percentage of money, grain, wine, and oil that you have been exacting from them"* (Nehemiah 5:10b-11).

For Israel's life there were prohibitions against such practices: *If you lend money to my people, to the poor among you, you shall not deal with them as a creditor; you shall not exact interest from them* (Exodus 22:25).

*"You shall not charge interest on loans to your brother, interest on money, interest on food, interest on anything that is lent"* (Deuteronomy 23:19).

Jesus understood how central the family farm was to the life of the people. Generation after generation it would be passed down to the eldest son who was responsible for keeping it alive. Jesus was also aware of how money was used to gain power, influence, and control. And we have seen plenty of examples, seemingly on a daily basis, of how unfettered power leads to corruption. It is a perennial struggle mirrored in this poem by Kabir, from the 15<sup>th</sup> century.

AN INTELLIGENT RICH PERSON

*I don't think there is such a thing as  
an intelligent mega-rich  
person.*

*For who with a fine mind can look  
out upon this world and  
hoard*

*what can nourish  
a thousand  
souls.*

The master in our parable was a master hoarder, employing his slaves to do his mercenary business. He lived in a way that took from others without giving anything back. He was surely not a model for our God who, out of love and compassion, gives life to all.

And here's an interesting segue into next week's lesson, commonly known as the *Great Judgment*, and also known as *the separation of the sheep and goats*. The fate of the 3<sup>rd</sup> slave in today's reading is a fair description of the reality of the poor all over the world, who live in a kind of darkness out of sight of the well to do. Their survival at the margins of society, no doubt, includes real weeping and gnashing of teeth. But this is exactly where Jesus will be found in the parable of the *Great Judgment*.

I must confess, in light of today's lesson, that I am one of the wealthy ones; Heidi and I have a beautiful new home, we eat more than once a day; we are rich. This ancient text is a real challenge for me. How do I use my wealth to give life and not take it away from others? Am I stewarding my wealth, my abilities and passion in a way that recognizes the plight of the poor, as the Gospel of Jesus Christ demands?

This is why I believe mission work is the life-blood of the church. As the body of Christ *we find our life* in giving ourselves to those in need. As long as selfishness and greed are celebrated by some, we will have the poor amongst us. So the question before the church is:

Where is God leading us to open our hearts? Where is God leading us to be givers and not takers? The answers will illuminate a pathway to new life. The answers will reveal a bounty characterized by the kingdom of God, overflowing with the joy of our one true God. The Gospel calls us to life; a life found in giving, as we have been given.

Let us pray: Compassionate God, open our hearts to hear the cries of the poor in our midst, and lead us to become channels of your hope and life for those who live at the margins. Amen.