

SERMON SERIES ON GENRES OF THE BIBLE

**The Parable of the Talents:
Risk and Responsibility (Matt 25:14-30)**Jerry Truex; July 6, 2008

A. Introduction

We continue our series on genres of the Bible. It's important to know what kind of literature we are reading so we can apply the right type of tools to interpret it. We wouldn't bring the same expectation we bring to biblical law as we would biblical poetry. We wouldn't want to confuse historical literature with apocalyptic literature. Today, we will focus on Jesus' parables and one in particular, the Parable of the Talents.

B. What is a parable?

About one-third of Jesus' teaching is in parables. The Greek word *parabolē* occurs 50 times in the NT.

1. Mini-story

A parable is a mini-story that illustrates what the kingdom of God is like. A parable is a story drawn from everyday life, which invites us to view the world differently. The story has a double meaning—a literal and a moral-religious meaning.

2. Invitational form of speech

The parables of Jesus were *invitational forms of speech*. They invite us to see ourselves and the world differently, to see how God is involved in the everyday affairs of human beings. They invite us to encounter God, to experience God, here-and-now.

3. About our relationship with God

The parables draw us into the world of the parable and invite us to see the Kingdom of God—our relationship with God—and in the process to see world differently from how we have been conditioned to see it.

The purpose of the parable is *to change us*, to lead us to a decision or an action or an experience of God right now.

For this reason, parables cannot be reducible to a single idea, a proposition, or a moral. They are open-ended.

C. Types of Parables

There are three types of parables.

1. Similitudes

It is a concise story about something recurrent, something that would seem familiar to the hearers. When it is heard, one is likely to “that’s how life is.”

Usually similitudes are told in the present tense. There are about 12 similitudes in the NT. Example:

Lost Coin. Luke 15:8 What woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? 15:9 When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, “Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.”

2. Narrative Parables

Narrative parables tell a story, not about something recurrent (like the similitude of “the Lost Coin”), but about *a one-time event*, which is fictitious.

It is narrated in the past tense and begins like “A certain creditor ...” (Lk 7:14), or “There was once a rich man...” (Lk 16:1), or “A sower went out to sow...” (Mk 4:3), or with an explicit statement of comparison, “The Kingdom of God is like...” There are about 17 in the NT.

Yeast: Luke 13:20 And again he said, "To what should I compare the kingdom of God? 13:21 It is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened."

Hidden Treasure: Matt 13:44 "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field."

3. Example Stories

Presents an implied comparison drawn from life, but whereas the similitude and narrative parable present an analogy of dissimilar things—a lost coin and heaven—the example story compares similar things.

Only four example stories in NT: Good Samaritan (Lk 10:29-37), Rich Fool (Lk 12:16-21), Rich man and Lazarus (Lk 16:19-31), and the Pharisee and the Tax Collector (Lk 18:19-14).

D. The Parable of the Talents (Matt 25:14-30)

1. An invitation to be responsible

The Parable of the Talents is a narrative parable. It is usually understood to be about the last judgment; how God will judge us for the things we have done—or not done—in this life.

However, there is much more to the parable. I'm going to try to show you how the parable is an invitation to take responsibility for one self and, when people do, they experience authentic existence or divinely infused existence.

I'll try to show you that the Parable is about taking *responsibility* for our actions and attitudes, about taking *risks* beyond our comfort zones, beyond our self-imposed limitations.

2. Talent (Gk *talanton*)

What is a "talents? The word for "talents" in the Greek is *talanton* (a measure of weight 26-26 kgs). The English word "talents," referring to one's abilities, was probably derived the from Greek term.

But here the word refers to a very large sum of money—75-96 pounds of silver. Each talent was equivalent to about 20 years of work. So the master was very generous to all the slaves—even to the one who received only one talent.

In the Parable, the “talent” refers to an enormous amount of money. But, the talent is also metaphor for God-given talents (abilities)—perhaps as a teacher, mother, doctor, or worker—to be developed in life.

3. Ability (Gk *dunamis*)

Look at the parable. Notice that each of the slaves received “according to his own ability” (*dunamis*).

25:15 to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability

Dunamis is often translated *power* and is used synonymously with *spiritual gifts* by Paul. Each slave was given an enormous amount of money. The amount depended on the ability or power (*dunamis*) that God had *already given* to each of them.

Talents (responsibility) is proportionate to the ability (*dunamis*) God has already given.

4. Four Contrasts

The parable contrasts two types of individuals, two ways of being or existing. There are four contrasts between these two types of people.

a. Working vs. Hiding

For the first contrast, look at verses 16-17.

25:16 The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. 25:17 In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents.

Notice that the first two slaves “traded”—“worked” (*ergazomai*)—with the talents in the open public. And their work with the talents became an

“advantage” (*kerdainō*) for them. The first two slaves took a risk. They worked with their talents, knowing that they could lose them. But, in taking risk, they gained something.

Now look at verse 18.

25:18 But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money.

We are told that the third slave “dug a hole” and “hid” the talent. The word for “hid” is *kruptō* — to hide ... to conceal to cover up to keep secret. The third slave sought to avoid the risk of trading in the market. He wanted to PRESERVE exactly what was given to him. He COVERED UP the generous gift of the master. He played it safe.

When we look at the one-talent person, we see the anxiety of person who will not step into the unknown. He or she will not risk trying to fulfill their own possibilities.

- S/he restricts his own existence.
- S/he is the victim of her own self-imposed limitations.
- His anxiety paralyzes his action.

Beyond burying the talent, this type of person takes no action until the last minute ... until the master comes back. It is not proactive, but reactive life.

b. Generous vs. Harsh Master

For the second contrast, look at verse 20.

25:20 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.'

This slave takes the initiative and seeks the master. He takes responsibility for what he had been given and makes something of it.

“Master,” he says, “You handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents.” The language is the same for the second slave in verse 22. The first two slaves recognized the “generosity” (*paradidomi*; “handed over”) of the master and their responsibility for what master had entrusted them.

In contrast, look at verse 24-25.

25:24 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; 25:25 so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.'

The one-talent man does not affirm the generosity of the master. Instead, he blames the master of being harsh and unfair—"I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed."

He refuses to be responsible for his own failure. When faced with the crisis of having to give an account of his life, he places blame for his failure on the master himself. The one-talent man refused to hold himself accountable and viewed himself as a victim. When he viewed himself as a victim, he acted like a victim. Helpless. Unable to act or change his situation.

c. Risk vs. Retreat

For the third contrast, look at verses 21 and 23 together.

25:21 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.'

25:23 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.'

They say the same thing. For taking responsibilities and appropriate risk, the first two slaves are given more—the master praises both slaves, gives them more, and announces their joy.

Faithful slaves or people who live authentic lives, look at what is given to them ... make realistic appraisals ... and work with what they have.

- They don't cover up, hide from life, or shrink from risk.

- They used the cards they were dealt with.
- They don't complain.
- They didn't play the victim.
- They don't blame.
- They take action. Not what they wanted, but what the master wanted.

In contrast, look at verse 28. What happened to the one-talent man?

25:28 So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. 25:29 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. 25:30 As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'

He lost what he had. The one-talent man wanted to avoid risk and play it safe. But he was forced to recognize that self-protective non-action is not the way of authentic existence.

Notice the progression in the story: *From* the refusal to take a risk ... *to* blaming someone else—namely, God ... *to* the loss of opportunity.

d. Joy vs. Outer Darkness

The fourth contrast is between joy and outer darkness. In the end, the two faithful slaves enter into the joy of their master. The third slave is cast into outer darkness. What is "outer darkness"?

The parable as a whole suggests that "outer darkness" is

- a state of being where one refuses to take responsibility,
- refuses to take action,
- plays the victim, and
- blames God or other people.

That is darkness. The universe is hostile. God cannot be trusted. That is "outer darkness."

5. Conclusion

In the Parable of the Talents, we are presented with a choice. We can be one of two types of individuals. We can be:

a. Irresponsible Fearful People:

- We avoid risky action, rather than trusting God
- We view God as harsh, unfair, and untrustworthy
- We let our abilities and talents atrophy and become useless
- We experience life as “outer darkness”

b. Responsible Risk Takers:

- We work with what God has given us—we don’t complain or blame
- We view God as generous, trustworthy, and Someone to please
- We exercise and grow in our abilities and talents
- We experience the joy of God, here-and-now