

The story involves a very rich man who entrusts his possessions to his servants before going away on a journey. One receives five talents, another two, and the last receives one.

Unlike the master in Luke's version of this parable, who instructs his slaves to invest the money, the master in Matthew presumes his servants know how to increase his holdings in his absence. While he is away, two of the servants invest and double the money. For this they earn the master's praise and they are given increased responsibilities. The third buries the money, which does not increase the yield but was a good way to safeguard money and possessions in antiquity. For this he receives harsh words and severe punishment.

An important key to understanding the parable is to keep in mind that Jesus did not live in a capitalist system in which it is thought that wealth can be increased by investment. Instead, people had a notion of limited good: there is only so much wealth and any increase to one person takes away from another. A typical peasant would aim only to have enough to take care of his family. One who amassed large amounts for himself would be seen as greedy and wicked. In the parable, then, the third servant is the honorable one—only he has refused to cooperate in the system by which his master continues to accrue huge amounts of money while others go wanting. The parable encourages disciples to find ways to stand together as they confront unjust systems and not to be found in a vulnerable solitary position as was the third servant.

In the perspective of this parable, one sees that the man going on a journey is not a figure for God, and the parable is not an exhortation for people to use their God-given talents to the full. While the latter is an important thing for Christians to do, it was not likely to be the way Jesus' first hearers understood the parable, since *talanton* does not have this metaphorical connotation in Greek.

In this parable as I said earlier, three individuals are given a different number of talents. Two of them increased what they had. One did nothing with it and was condemned. This parable acknowledges that we are not born equally talented. We are created equal in human rights of course but this does not mean that we are equal in abilities. We have different intellectual abilities and different physical strengths and skills. We are born with different social opportunities and advantages, different genetic inheritances. Like the servants in the Gospel we are entrusted with different talents.

The question that we can naturally ask to ourselves in this Gospel is: Are we using our talents and resources in the service of God and of His Church? The man in the Gospel who was given the least was not a bad man. He did not steal the money, he did not misuse it. His only mistake was that he buried the money in the ground and did nothing with it for the Master.

Now, the lesson of the parable is this: All three persons in the parable received talents. For two of them, those talents became blessings. For one, it became a judgment. The first two servants were rewarded for their faithfulness, courage and activity. The third servant was judged for his unfaithfulness and inactivity. Who is this third servant? Some have interpreted that he stands for the Scribes and Pharisees whose emphasis was on preservation rather than spiritual transformation. Our tradition has seen this third servant as potentially being each of us.

We who have been hearing this Gospel passage, let us think about our gift; maybe it is a gift for friendship, for organization, for leadership, for spiritual strength, for reaching out, for teaching, for giving advice, for consolation, for deep prayer. It may be the gift of money or possessions that could bring blessings to others. Whatever the talents and resources we have been given, are we using them in the service of the Lord? For the glory of God and the salvation of the world?

The talents we have are gifts. When we use them in the service of the Lord, they become blessings.