

Parable of the Talents 24 Pentecost

Having served as Diocesan Stewardship Officer for a term in Milwaukee, I was always on the lookout for biblical passages relevant for building effective Stewardship sermons. From Google, Feb. 2005: "The Bible offers 500 verses on prayer, fewer than 500 verses on faith, and more than 2,000 verses on money. In fact, 15 percent of everything Jesus ever taught was on the topic of money and possessions-more than His teachings on heaven and hell combined."

The Parable of the Talents is an ideal sermon builder for a stewardship theme. We often talk about stewardship of

talent, time and treasure, and one can relate this parable to all three themes.

There are Gifts Assessment tools that churches use to help members to discover gifts they have that could be helpful in the local church or diocese.. For example, an accountant might be the ideal candidate to serve as church treasurer, and a music teacher might relish leading the choir. These are gifts or talents that can be related to the Parable of the Talents. In fact, our use of the word talent as an aptitude grows out of the biblical talent as a measure of money.

In recruiting members for church ministries I have used the phrase, “God doesn’t choose the fit, rather He fits

who He chooses.” A willingness to serve and be filled with the Holy Spirit is most needed in offering whatever talent we have.

If one member can pledge the equivalent to five talents to the annual budget, and another can only afford to pledge the equivalent to two talents, and another only the equivalent of one talent, that is perfectly okay. People are giving sacrificially out of what they can actually afford to give. As to raw talent or ability, there are only a few as talented as LeBron James, and many hundreds of thousands of weekend athletes—but we work with what we are blessed with.

I had always taken the Parable of the Talents at face value. The learning being that we should expend our best effort to produce the maximum profit for our boss. The five and two talent men did their best according to their ability, while the lazy, slothful third servant did nothing to increase the master's wealth, only burying his one talent in the ground. Moral of the story: don't waste the opportunities and talents you have been given. My old boss in the life insurance business used to say: "Do Something, even if it's wrong."

I am quite aware that an important theme in Luke's Gospel is the use or misuse of money and how Christians are to deal with wealth. The Story of Lazarus and Dives clearly underlines Luke's concern for the poor and his

contempt for the uber rich who cast their bread crumbs to poor men and hungry dogs. I remember reading a commentary that imagined Dives wiping the meat grease from his face and hands and tossing away whole hunks of bread which he used as a napkin.

Today's text uses the Greek word *doulos* to describe the recipients of the Talents: Slave has so many negative connotations in the American context, that I prefer to use servants instead of slaves. There are some scholars who use the term retainers instead of slave or servant, as the three recipients of the Talents were expected to act on behalf of the owner or Nobleman, but had some degree of

freedom as to how they would behave in the Nobleman's absence.

With this in mind, an article by Professor Herzog "The Vulnerability of the Whistleblower" on the Parable of the Talents was an eye opener to me. In his section, The Nobleman and his Retainers, Herzog, pp. 157-8, He writes: "The parable can be divided into three scenes: 1) the distribution of wealth; 2) the business venture, and, 3) the reckoning....One talent is no mean amount of money to place in another's hands." So all three retainers had some status in the Nobleman's household. They all knew the business climate and culture in which they were expected to participate. They knew that exploiting the peasants and villagers who were part of the nobleman's holdings would be their key to being able to earn some

extra for themselves. I never thought about the possibility that the retainers were not only creating additional wealth for the nobleman, but some for themselves in the process.

In my previous interpretations of the parable, it never occurred to me that Luke was making some social commentary on what he deemed an unjust economic system. Again, quoting Herzog, p. 161, “(the first two retainers) both use the same exploitative economy to increase the plunder that constitutes the master’s wealth.”

The reckoning scene is one which Herzog depicts as the third servant being the hero and the whistleblower in this parable. The speech by the whistleblower exposed the

nobleman as cruel and rapacious. For his truth telling, the third servant was banished into the grinding poverty that he was critiquing. Even free peasants lived with the constant pressure of tributes to Rome and the tax system. It must have been a crisis of conscience that prompted the third servant to speak out in critique of his master and the corrupt economic system that he benefitted from.

It is a very different view of this parable to imagine that theme of the whistleblower bravely stepping out against an oppressive economic system, only to be banished into that cruel existence himself.

Brad Young in “The Parables: Jewish Tradition and Christian Interpretation” takes a slightly more nuanced

position about the intentions of the third retainer, than that which I have taken in the past. Instead of seeing him as simply lazy and fearful, Young suggests that the third retainer had good intentions—that is, he above all did not want to lose any of the master's money, while Herzog posits that the third retainer was sick of the inequity and cruelty of the economic system and out of principle refused to participate in it any longer.

I credit the online course on The Parables for these fresh insights into the familiar Parable of the Talents.

Lord, help us to be aware of and to oppose oppressive economic systems in our day.

AMEN

