

The Church of the 3rd Servant

Matthew 25: 14-30

¹⁴ “For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; ¹⁵ to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. ¹⁶ The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. ¹⁷ In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. 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. ¹⁹ After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. 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.’ 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.’ ²² 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.’ 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.’ 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 so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.’ ²⁶ 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? ²⁷ 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. ²⁸ So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. 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. ³⁰ As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’

Imagine a modern take on Jesus’ parable. Think about some rich real estate mogul calling three apprentices and saying, “I need to go check in on some of my other properties. Run the business for me locally while I’m gone. Here’s five million dollars for you. Two million for you. And one million bucks for you. Now go make some wise investments and remember: the more I make, the more you make. So two of them go out looking for deals. They buy up properties, flip houses and make some good cash on cash returns. Except, one of them doesn’t do it. She buries the money under her mattress. Maybe she doesn’t want to disappoint her boss. Maybe she doesn’t believe in herself. Whatever the reason, she doesn’t play. When the boss comes back to settle up, he offers two of his employees a promotion. “You’ve been faithful to me. Enter into my joy” he says, “here’s a beach house for you. Here’s the keys to a new Mercedes for you.” But to the 3rd employee he ridicules: “What’s the matter with you? You could’ve at least earned some interest at the bank! Now get out of my sight. You’re worthless! You’re fired” What an odd parable for Jesus to tell just before he goes to the cross, isn’t it?

As odd of a story as it is, we think we know it pretty well. Most of us traditional church folk hear the parable around stewardship season. We have heard it so many times we know where it is headed: God has given us talents to use. And as we wait for Jesus to return, we are not to bury our gifts. Instead, we are to invest them in the world in such a way that God's kingdom will grow. It's about numbers, right? Whatever you do, DO NOT be like the lazy 3rd servant. Not unless you want to end up in a place where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. I'm not really sure what that entirely means, but it doesn't sound like a good time. Many of us grew up hearing that when we invest our gifts in the church we can expect to be rewarded and when our time on earth expires, we will be called "good and faithful servants." We have heard it all before. We know where the parable is headed.

Except, here is the problem: if we interpret the little "m" master in the story as the capital "M" Master—God—then God is harsh. Does God really feel people are "wicked and lazy" if we don't multiply the investment? Does God call people worthless because they don't play the Monopoly game? So perhaps we need to listen the story with 1st century ears. If we go back to Jesus' time elite landowners acquired vast amounts of land by offering loans to struggling desperate farmers at outrageous interest rates—from 60%-200%. When the desperate farmers couldn't pay off the loan, landowners would foreclose on the property. So these landowners would build their wealth by taking advantage of the poor farmers who would have no other choice but to sell if they wanted to keep feeding their families. Landowners in Jesus' time were ruthless businesspeople. And as they would travel to check in on their investments, they would entrust their household bureaucrats—or slaves—to collect on their outstanding debts. The more the master made, the more commission the slave made. Two of the slaves adopt the lifestyle of the master and are rewarded for it. But the 3rd slave does not do it. She does not make any money for herself and, more importantly, does not make any money for her little "m" master. She simply offers him back what is his—no more, no less.

Now let's ask ourselves: is it God's system who calls people wicked and lazy and worthless if they don't increase the privilege of the "haves" at the expense of the "have nots" or is this the way our system works? Does God reap where God puts no effort, and gather where God had not prepared, or do little "m" masters do that? Does God throw temper tantrums discarding people when God doesn't get God's way, or does that sound like somebody else? I mean, could we imagine Jesus taking anything away from those who have little and giving it to those who already have a lot?

So now the question: who is the exemplary figure in the parable?

Here's a theological quiz: When Jesus begins his famous Sermon on the Mount, who does he say the Kingdom of God belongs to: the rich or the poor?

When Jesus talks about money and our treasure being where our heart is, what does he say about serving two masters: about little "m" master and capital "M" Master?

In the very next paragraph after this parable, who does Jesus identify with: those who ignore the poor or those who serve the poor?

Sorry, that's a trick question: because Jesus identifies *as the poor!*
He identifies with the hungry—those who the privileged call "lazy."

He identifies with the incarcerated—those who the world labels, “wicked.”
He identifies with those without health care and who venture economies discard as worthless.
So who is the exemplary figure in the parable and how in the world did it become a stewardship passage?

But still, there is one part of the parable I can’t wrap my head around: when the 3rd servant says, “I was afraid, so I buried your money.” If the 3rd servant is the hero, why is fear the motivator?

And then I remembered when I was in elementary school and a group of kids were picking on the outsider who had no friends. When I ask myself why I didn’t challenge them, it is because I was afraid.

Or listen to stories about clergy who don’t want to stir the political pot in their churches or speak out for justice, because they are afraid they will lose their jobs.

Fear is a very real motivator in our lives.

But why would Jesus make someone who is afraid the hero of the story?

Then I almost fell out of my chair when I looked up the Greek. You see, the word for “fear” is a rare ambiguous form of the word which could be translated one of two ways: either “I was afraid, because you are a harsh man, so I buried the money” as we have traditionally read it. Or “you [master] are feared, because you are a harsh man, so I buried the money.” In other words, the 3rd servant buries the money as a way of refusing to participate in a system of fear which takes advantage of the poor. *Now that sounds like Jesus.*

Either way we interpret it, we know what happens when someone challenges the status quo.

When the firefighters in Winston spoke out against racism within their own department.

When a tired woman refuses to go to the back of the bus.

When a family decides to put a “Black Lives Matter” sign in their front yard in rural America.

The system bites back and there is the possibility of being put out in the darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth—whatever that means.

Perhaps that is why Jesus tells us this parable just before he goes to the cross, just before he is cast out into the darkness. To give us the raw reality of what happens when we use our privileged capital to do what is fair and true and just.

Or maybe it’s simply a parable about stewardship...

We get to decide which character in the story Jesus is calling the church to be.

We get to decide which master—little “m” or big “M”—will call us “good and faithful.”

And ultimately, we get to decide whose joy we enter into.