

The Parable of the Talents: Questions of Power, Profit, Perspective

Matthew 25: 14–31; Ezekiel 34

St Margaret's Uniting Church Mooroolbark

Deborah Storie 19 Nov 2017

In August 2007, John Howard, then Prime Minister of Australia, referred to Matthew's parable of the talents in a pre-election address to the churches:

The Parable of the Talents to me has always been, has always seemed to me to be the 'free enterprise parable.' The parable that tells us that we have a responsibility if we are given assets to add to those assets.¹

John Howard is not alone in understanding the parable this way.

My earliest memory of the Parable of the Talents is from my teenage years when our Bible Class explored our giftings/talents (things we excelled at and enjoyed) in order to choose the university course and future career we were most likely to succeed and feel fulfilled in and, thereby, glorify God. We did not consider how we might influence the wider world or what broader purposes our careers might serve or frustrate: talented pianists should glorify God by playing brilliantly; talented mathematicians should apply their skills meticulously; and so on.

Since then, I've most often heard the Parable of the Talents used to support fund raising appeals or stewardship teaching. This teaching allegorises the parable. The person going on a journey represents God or Jesus. Until Jesus returns, we should, like the first two slaves, make the most of the resources 'with which God has blessed us' and the opportunities 'God brings our way', tithing 10 % before saving and investing to provide for our families, prepare for retirement, and insure against misfortune.

No-one seemed to notice how this grated against Jesus' other teaching about love of God and neighbour and warnings against amassing treasure on earth. Accumulating wealth was OK—virtuous even—provided we didn't 'love' mammon, were not 'enslaved' by it, and did not steal, lie, embezzle, cheat on tax returns, or invest in immoral industries such as prostitution, tobacco or gambling.

Until very recently, I never heard the parable considered within the context of Matthew's wider narrative, the social and economic realities of first century Palestine, or the social and economic realities of our world today.

Growing up, I was taught that parables were earthly stories with heavenly meanings. I didn't find parables very interesting. In my experience, they were pretty dull, teaching simple moral points, things we already knew. Why, I wondered, did Jesus teach such basic stuff in such roundabout, indirect ways?

¹ As reported by Tom Iggulden, "Christian Community Hears from Howard, Rudd," Lateline (Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 2007).

I began to read parables differently while living in an Afghan village. Similarities between rural Afghanistan and biblical lands brought the worlds of the Bible and daily life together. Each day, our community development team used reflective and appreciative questioning techniques to encourage our village neighbours to identify the issues most important to them and explore the implications and ramifications of addressing these issues in various ways.

We drew pictures, told stories, and asked open ended questions. We avoided answering questions in didactic or prescriptive ways. We knew that lectures and other forms of direct teaching implicitly denigrated the knowledge, skills and wisdom of local people. It might receive verbal assent—Afghans are extremely courteous—but would not lead to positive change.

Reading in this context, I noticed that the gospels portrayed Jesus as a story-teller who rarely gave straight answers to questions. I wondered whether Jesus, like our community development team, was inviting people to break loose of the givens of their day and live towards a different future. Inadvertently, I began to read Jesus' parables not as simple illustrations of moral points but as complex stories that unveiled the gap between what situations are said to be and what they actually are, helping people see their situation clearly—and decide what to do about it.

Parables are effective precisely because they do not spell everything out and do not tell us what to do. Drawing us into the parable story, they invite us to navigate the parable-world ourselves: If we were in this situation, what would we do? And would we do rightly? As William Herzog put it:

parables are not earthly stories with heavenly meanings but *earthy* stories with *heavy* meanings.²

People who are familiar with the Bible often struggle to distinguish between what the Bible says and what they've been taught about it. I now try to put all my previous encounters with a parable out of my mind before I sit down and listen to several chapters of the Gospel in one sitting so that I can imagine myself into the story. I want to listen to the parable *as if* I was one of those to whom it was first told. I want to hear it *as if* for the first time.

When it came to the parable of the talents, I had quite a lot of accumulated baggage to put aside.

1. *Does the man who went on a journey and ordered his slaves to invest money for him represent God/Jesus?* If we assume that he is a God figure, we cannot criticise him in anyway. God is good. Everything God does, everything God demands, must, by definition, be good. If the slave-owner represents God, then the third slave's description of him *must* be false: "You are a harsh man, reaping where you do not sow and gathering where you did not scatter seed . . ." Jesus doesn't say that the man

² William R II Herzog, *Parables as Subversive Speech: Jesus as Pedagogue of the Oppressed* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox, 1994). P. 3.

represents God nor that he is good. Neither does Matthew. If we choose to assume that, it's our choice. It is not in the Bible.

Some English versions further complicate the situation by subtly changing the parable in ways that lead us to assume that the slave-owner does indeed represent God. For example, the NKJV, begins the parable this way: "For the kingdom of heaven is like" (25:14). The words "the kingdom of heaven" were added by the translators. They are not in the original Greek. The NRSV gives a closer translation: "For it's as if . . ." (25.14).

2. *Are the other characters servants or slaves?* Many English translations mistranslate *doulos* in parables as 'servant' rather than 'slave.'³ This is misleading. Slavery in the first century Roman Empire was as horrible as it was real. Softening the language of slavery is dangerous. It shields us from the harsh realities the parable reflects – and prevents the parable from speaking into enslaving realities in our own world.
3. *What are talents?* Are they God-given giftings, things we excel at and enjoy, or something else? The Oxford Dictionary lists the following three meanings for the noun 'talent':

- i. A denomination of weight used by the Assyrian, Babylonian, Greek, Romans and other ancient empires, varying with time, people and locality.
- ii. An inclination, disposition, propensity, will, wish, desire, state of mind.
- iii. Mental endowment; natural ability. Power or ability of mind or body viewed as something divinely entrusted to a person for use and improvement.

Read the small print and you'll discover that the third sense (God-given gift or ability) "originated in a figurative use of the first sense of the word taken from the parable of the talents." There is no evidence that talent meant anything other than a weight or an amount of money (measured by its weight in metal) in the first century. As Eric DeBode and Ched Myers put it, 'talent' in the Gospels "has nothing to do with our individual gifts and everything to do with economics."⁴

The talents in this parable are money, stacks of money. Here's the maths:

- 1 talent = 30 – 40 kg
- 1 talent of silver = 60 minae
- 1 mina = 100 drachmae
- 1 drachma = 2 denarii
- 1 denarius = daily rate for hired labourers
- 120,000 days' or 337 years' work

That last line is my arithmetic. You might want to check it!

³ NKJ, NIV, CEV, RSV.

⁴ Eric DeBode and Ched Myers. "Towering Trees and 'Talented' Slaves" *The Other Side* 35/3 (1999).

When I put my assumptions about the parable and imagined myself into the Gospel world, I began to notice things I'd habitually overlooked. I began to ask questions I hadn't thought to ask before.

1. *Where, when and to whom did Jesus tell the parable?* On the Mount of Olives, just before Passover, to the disciples. The disciples had come to Jesus privately and asked: "What will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?" (Matt 24.3). The parable is part of a much longer body of private teaching. No-one else is listening in.
2. *Is the parable's picture of social and economic relations realistic?* Yes. Rome was a slave-making, slave-dependent state. Rome's client kings, the Herods, depended on slaves to administer their kingdoms. Jewish collaborators, like the ruling priests, also owned large numbers of slaves. The amount of money is not hyperbolic as some scholars claim. While most people prayed for daily bread and freedom from debt, powerful elites spent and invested enormous sums. They dealt in talents—although their slaves usually did the actual dealing. It was an economy which gave more to the haves and took away from the have-nots the little they had.
3. *How did the slaves make such large profits?* The slave-owner doesn't ask and the good, faithful slave's don't say. However, the third slave's description of his owner's usual practices, together with what we know of the economy of first century Palestine, give a general idea.
4. *Whose perspective does Jesus affirm?* The slave-owner's or the non-compliant slave's? On the surface of things, Jesus makes no comment at all. Yet, if we listen to the parable as part of Matthew's Gospel and as part of the Bible, including the Old Testament, Jesus' Bible, there are numerous hints. The slave-owner rebukes the slave for not at least putting the talent on the money lenders table so that his owner could have collected interest (25.27). The Old Testament explicitly forbids taking interest. It also warns, in many places, against accumulating wealth. Both testaments hold out an ideal vision of approximate equality, every family sitting beneath their own vine and fig tree, living in houses they built themselves, and eating the fruit of their own land. Samuel tells us that even kings were not to accumulate much silver . . . Like John the Baptist and Jesus, the third slave stands in the prophetic tradition of Israel: telling truth to power, refusing to participate in violent and covetous schemes—and pays the price. Even within the parable's immediate context, the economic practices this man rewards and appears to demand contrast with those affirmed by the Son of Man in the following story, the story of the sheep and the goats.

So what about us? If read it as a realistic fictional story, the parable still unveils the gap between what situations are said to be and what they actually are. It challenges us to see our situation clearly—and decide what to do. It invites us to break loose of the givens of our day and live towards a different future.

Living two-thousand years later, in relative prosperity and relative safety, we struggle to bridge the gap between the world the parable portrays and our own. Let's eavesdrop on

people who didn't live that long ago but whose experiences were very different to our own as they discuss the parable.

*Inmates of a maximum security prison in the US read the Bible with a visiting chaplain each week.*⁵ On one occasion, the prisoners had chosen to read the Parable of the Talents but, once the study started, declared the parable 'boring' and didn't get into the discussion as they usually did. They assumed that the parable taught about "talents God gave us" and "how we should use them." They resisted the idea that the rich man might not be God. Even after learning that 'talents' were money and the 'servants' were slaves, they struggled to engage the parable until the chaplain (Robert Fortna) stopped asking what they thought it 'meant' and started asking how they 'felt' about it. This is what happened next.

Fortna: Which of those three slaves in the story do you like the best?

Smitty I kinda dig that third dude.

Fortna: Let's say you're that guy. ... A single talent was worth about fifteen years' wages for a poor laborer.

Smitty: You mean, we talking big money.

Fortna: So, Smitty, how do you feel about the boss who left you with all this money to invest for him?

Smitty (after a pause and then very slowly): Why that son-of-a-bitch!

Fortna: Why?

Smitty: He just part of the System. He tryin' to use me to make his money for him . . . He gets the cash. I gets the rap. He exploitin me man!

Fortna: So is he God?

Smitty: Course not. Who sayin' that?

Next, we'll travel to Nicaragua and listen in as peasants, campesinos, discuss the parable in church. The faith community of Solentiname met each week to worship, pray and study God's word. Instead of giving a homily on the Gospel reading, the priest (Ernesto) asked his congregation to discuss it and teach each other. This is part of their discussion about the Parable of the Talents.⁶

Oscar: That man had to go away and he wanted his money to increase. And he looked for others who were exploiters like him, and he gave them money so they'd exploit the people and earn more and get double what he was leaving them. But the guy that didn't cooperate. He was conscientious because he didn't have the strength to exploit his brothers and sisters. Then the boss got sore when he comes and hands back the same as what he'd been given

⁵ The story is told by Robert T Fortna, "Reading Jesus' Parable of the Talents through Underclass Eyes." *Forum* 8 (1992): 211–28.

⁶ This is a condensed and edited section of a much longer dialogue on the Parable of the Talents (Mt 25.14-30) in Ernesto Cardenal, *The Gospel in Solentiname* (trans. D Walsh; Maryknoll: Orbis, 1976) vol. I: 38–48.

- Priest: See, Oscar, here Christ gives the example of an exploiter, and his employees were exploiters too; and he wants them to multiply his money. And Christ says that's the way God acts with us.
- Oscar: What God wants us to multiply is love! . . . That's what this Gospel is saying, but maybe the rich don't understand it, and then what they do is screw you . . . Christ says that just as exploiters multiply money; so we . . . must multiply love.
- William: And love is money; love is wealth well-distributed; the two things are related . . . But the bad servant accuses [the master] of harvesting where he didn't sow. He makes him out a monster.
- Priest: As a miser is relentless in demanding with money; so God is relentless with love. . . . Those who have the most love will become richer and those who have very little are going to be left poorer, says Christ.
- Oscar: In that sense the thing is fine . . . But the truth is that this Gospel is a little involved with the question of money . .
- Oscar: The Gospel is very fashionable, everybody reads the Bible now. If, unfortunately somebody comes along who is quite . . . interested in money, and unfortunately he starts to read this Gospel, and understands it in his own way, these words are going to make him worse than before.
- Felipe: He couldn't be so stupid . . .
- Oscar: If they understood it there wouldn't be any rich people.
- Felipe: Rich people don't even notice things like that.
- Oscar: I'm saying then that if, unfortunately, they read it, they'll think it's a defence of them.
- Laureano: But don't they see that this isn't being said for them but for us?

The campesinos somehow managed to combine the reading their priest preferred, in which the rich man did represent God (kind-of), and their own conviction that the parable was a realistic story about power and money which spoke into their own experience.

So, what about us? We still live in a highly unequal world blighted by slavery and other forms of un-freedom where the now-global economy gives more to the haves and takes from the have-nots. The United Nations reports that inequality is increasing as more and more of the world's resources are channelled to produce products and services for the wealthy.⁷ Economists call this the 'deepening of capitalism.'⁸ World Wildlife Fund estimates that the planet passed the ecological break-even point in the early 1970s.⁹ Since then, we have used more resources than the planet can replace and produced more waste than it can absorb.

⁷ UNDP, *Human Development Report*, 2016.

⁸ Ankie Hoogvelt, *Globalization and the Postcolonial World* (London: Palgrave, 2001).

⁹ Graphs, charts and further details available from World Wildlife Fund, *Living Planet Report 2012* (Gland, Switzerland: WWF, 2012).

We Australians contribute to these crises. Nine out of ten Australians are among the 20% of the world's population who control 90% of global resources.¹⁰ Our social and economic systems normalise destructive commercial-industrial practices and promote irresponsible patterns of consumption which undermine ecosystems that sustain food production and maintain fresh water, forests and air, regulate climate and ameliorate infection and disease. Our ecological footprints are among the heaviest on earth.¹¹

The prophet Ezekiel speaks directly to us:

Is it not enough for you to feed on the good pasture, but you must tread down with your feet the rest of your pasture? When you drink of clear water, must you foul the rest with your feet? And must my sheep eat what you have trodden with your feet, and drink what you have fouled with your feet? (Ezekiel 34:18–19).

So what are we to do? The client kings of global capitalism deal in unimaginable sums of money, giving more to those who have while taking from the have not the little they had. Their ability to do this depends on ordinary people accepting the lie that money makes money rather than looking beneath bargain prices, bank statements or investment reports to ask what is really going on.

In one sense, we are like slave-owners who demand more and more profit without asking how profits are made. If we have money to invest, we need to invest it well—in businesses that preserve the environment and put people before profit, that enable life and don't destroy it.

In another sense, we are like the slaves. Sometimes, it feels as if the best we can do is to follow the third slave's example and resist the system by burying our money, refusing to participate in exploitative investments, and calling the powerful to account—even if we are afraid. But this is not the whole story. Jesus spoke elsewhere about salt, yeast and light. About the difference ordinary people can make when inspired by God's Spirit and living towards God's kingdom.

Taken together, the parable of the talents, Ezekiel's vision, and the story of the sheep and goats, contrast the economic vision and practices of God's kingdom (which give life) and those of the kingdoms of this world (which cause imprisonment, hunger, thirst, homelessness, slavery). Which lord will we serve? Will we serve the lords of this age or will we serve the lord of life?

Remember, the Son of Humanity who will come in all his glory to judge the nations is the good shepherd gives his life for the sheep and came that all might have life and abundantly.

¹⁰ Credit Suisse Research Institute, *Global Wealth Databook 2016*, Zurich, Credit Suisse, 2016.

¹¹ World Wildlife Fund *Living Planet Report 2014*, Gland, Switzerland, pp. 38–39.