

## **IT IS ABOUT MONEY**

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To the hearers of the first century this parable was absurd! First, let's be clear what it is about and what it is not about. It is not about those special skills or gifts that we call talents. It is not about singing or knitting; it is not about acting or being a whiz at math. It is about money. In the first century of the Christian Era a talent was a measure of money—a lot of money. A talent was the largest monetary unit—just a tad over 20 kilograms of silver, 6000 drachmas (and wouldn't the Greek nation of today like to have several talents in their treasury rather than Euro IOU's). But that's another story. One talent was equal to the amount of pay the average laborer would earn—in 15 years! According to our standards, that would make one talent worth about \$400,000. Thus, Jesus' parable is cast in terms that would be absurd to his listeners.

A second clarification: our reading says the master summoned his slaves—and that is a poor optional translation of the Greek word. The original word, in the Greek, is closer to servant—even a special servant, namely a subordinate official in a multi-personnel business. I believe a manager or a departmental head, maybe even vice-president, is closer to the meaning.

So, what is going on here? The Master—Owner—CEO does a very generous thing. He is going to leave town—for how long we do not know. Before leaving, he entrusts his wealth (or at least some of it) to three of his underlings. The first is given 5 talents, that is about two million dollars. The second is given \$800,000 and the third is given \$400,000. No instructions are given with these amounts.

Now, what happens? The first manager takes some risks, he trades (it must have been a bull market—or he was the grandfather of all hedge fund managers!) for he wheels and deals and invests. He is prudent and shrewd and doubles the Master's investment in him. He was indeed worthy of the trust the Master had in him. When the Master returns, this departmental manager has amassed four million dollars.

The second manager is just as risky (fortunate—lucky) for he also trades, invests, wheels and deals just as prudently as the first and he also doubles the Master's investment in him, returning a million and a half dollars.

Now the third... Well, what can we say. He is given to, nearly as lavishly as the others. But he obviously sees the Master differently than the other two. Manager One and Two trust the Master's generosity, in fact they are encouraged by it. They seem to know the Master to be generous, or they are confident that he will recognize their daring and financial acumen. Servant Three lives in fear of the Master, seeing him as harsh and conniving, a taker rather than a giver—even though he has just received \$400,000 from him! Out of his fear and his perception of the Master, he does nothing except hide the money—in a hole in the ground! But at least he did not lose it—and that is a good thing, it might even be worthy of some praise.

Now this parable is absurd. Who would give away three and a half million dollars, especially in the first century? These figures would have been nearly beyond comprehension. So, this parable is not a chapter from a business manual about investing wisely versus hoarding ones treasure. This parable is not about economics.

It is instructive to note when Jesus tells this parable, according to Matthew's account of his life. It is instructive to note where Jesus is when he tells this parable. This parable is in the larger context of Jesus' end teachings. He is nearing the Cross, He is in Jerusalem, and He is preparing his followers for how to live in the time between his death and his coming again. Jesus is telling his followers—us, how to live in this time, for we are still in this time between his death and resurrection and his triumphal return. This instruction is for us!

Servants One and Two are addressed upon the Master's return with the words "good and faithful". That is not a theological commentary. They have been good and faithful about the task and the responsibility they

have in life, namely to be a good manager in the total enterprise of the Master. They are good and faithful employees, they did not just passively wait for the Master's return, resting in their good fortune and living off the largess of the Master. They simply did what a good manager is supposed to do—to use the capital at their disposal in a gainful way, for the purpose for which it was intended. They took active responsibility for the blessing they received, they took risks to increase it, they took initiative to make this blessing double in value.

Servant Three did not lose the blessing. But he did nothing with it. He simply buried it where it could do no one any benefit—not himself, nor anyone else. He missed whole point of what the Master was about—to use his capital to make more. For the Master, a businessperson, it was very clear what he was about—to spend and circulate his wealth to make more—a very capitalistic understanding in the first century.

So, how to apprehend, how do we grasp this message so it makes some sense in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. I submit that the meaning is the same, regardless of the century. This is not about how to play the stock market, or how to invest. It is about understanding whoever is Master of our living. It is about having the free will to make a conscious decision to act in ways that our Master would approve or to face the consequences of misunderstanding and doing nothing with what we have received.

Now, we have established that this story is not confined to the first century—it is applicable to the meantime between Jesus life on earth and his triumphal return, so it applies to us. We have established that this is not about economics; it is about understanding the nature and the purpose of who ever is Master of our living, so it is important to understand that the teller of this story is Jesus. If we are of the faith persuasion that Jesus is our Lord (and we do use those words), then it is important that we understand his nature and his purpose. If we understand him to be one who strikes fear into our hearts, if we understand him to be conniving, harsh, and taking where he has not planted, then I assume we would act accordingly, like servant number three.

But, if we understand Jesus as our Lord to be full of grace and mercy, compassionate and giving, holding back nothing, not even his life so that people will become part of his kingdom, than I assume we would also act accordingly, like servants One and Two.

So, it comes down to what are we going to do with what we have. The choices are, according to this parable: A) take some risks, invest it in the purposes of the master, take some initiative, be a responsible steward of the largesse we have received, live daringly, expansively for the Kingdom of God. That means to pour out ourselves, our living, our abilities, yes, even our talents, as well as our money in lavish, generous ways for the building of the Kingdom of our Lord and Master.

Choice B) is to take the largesse we have been given—for God is a generous giver to all; to take what we have received and hoard it, hide it, keep it so that it does no one, not even self any gainful good.

But beware, this parable is about doing justice to the purposes of the Master or suffering the consequences upon the Master's return. The choice is ours. Amen.