

“Risking Ourselves”

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November 19, 2017

[Matthew 25:14-30](#)

Maybe the third guy was on to something. Burying your money in the ground, rather than risk losing it, seems like a pretty good idea, doesn't it? With the stock market often on a rollercoaster ride, maybe taking your money, putting it in a mason jar, and burying it in the backyard is the best thing to do with it. While our Finance Team wouldn't advise such a strategy, maybe some of us know people who've done just that. The market is up and down every day. It is enough to make you want to take your money and bury it in the ground. After all, if you put your money in a jar and put it in the ground, you know you probably won't *lose* anything. Sure, you won't *gain* anything, but you know exactly what you've got and that it's not going anywhere. People may think you're a bit odd, but at least your money is safe. And in a world of danger and uncertainty, *safety* can feel like enough.

But then we read this parable and we hear harsh words directed at that kind of safety. We hear the person who hides the money in the ground called “wicked” and “lazy.” We hear this person thrown in “the outer darkness” where there is “weeping and gnashing of teeth.” Wow. Maybe the safety that we can get by burying the money in the ground is *not* enough.

What we have to understand first about this parable is that it is not directly allegorical to God. We cannot simply replace the word “master” in this parable with “God” and put ourselves into the story as one of the servants and understand what Jesus was trying to get us to understand. The parables are teaching stories, not exact parallels to God. Jesus wants us to understand the seriousness of the issue that we all face in not investing what God has given us. However, I think the biggest thing we have to understand is that this is not really about money.

This text is often preached as having to do with money. It is preached as yet another sermon about how we need to give more to the church. At the tail end of our stewardship campaign, I'm certainly not going to argue against that point, but I don't think *that* was what Jesus was trying to get us to understand. He used figures for money in the parable because it is what His audience would readily understand, but He wasn't talking about money. The amounts of money in the parable are a give-away that they shouldn't be taken literally. Now, there are different

understandings of the word “talent” in this passage, but many scholars understand it this way: a talent was about 6000 denarii, and a denarius was one day’s wage. So, what the *third* person received, one talent, was equal to 6000 days’ wages. That’s over 16 *years’* wages! The second person received two talents, or over 32 *years’* wages, and the first person received five talents, or over 82 *years’* wages. Add that all up and you have about 48,000 denarii, or the wages for a day laborer for about 131 years. Who goes on a journey and entrusts to others a sum of money equivalent to the wages for a person for over 130 *years*? If we put that into modern numbers, and assume a modest salary of \$25,000, we are talking about 3.25 *million* dollars. So, this man goes on a trip, and entrusts to his *slaves* a total of 3.25 million dollars. This is just not a very likely scenario! Even less likely is the rate of return that the first two men get. They each get a return of 100% on their investment. Kristi and I have a savings account where we are currently getting 0.25% interest. Invest those 5 talents in our savings account, and in one year, the return will be an additional .00125 talents. CDs, of course, get a few percent interest, and investing in aggressive stocks in the stock market might get you 20, 30%, but 100%? *Where* were these guys investing? Somehow, they are entrusted with 2 or 5 talents, and they earn 2 or 5 talents more. It’s incredible; and by that I mean *not* credible. It’s just not a realistic scenario. Jesus was using an example that shouldn’t be taken literally. He was making a point, but *what* point? Where should our focus be? We should notice that the ones who did the amazing investments are discussed in two verses apiece, whereas the “wicked” and “lazy” slave got seven verses. It looks like we are supposed to pay attention to *him*.

But *what* are we to learn from him? If this isn’t about money, what is it? Well, here’s something else it is not – it’s not about “talents” in the modern definition of the word, either. The word Jesus used had no connotation of natural abilities that we should cultivate. This passage is often interpreted to refer to either money or abilities, but that’s not really what Jesus was saying. So, just what was Jesus talking about?

The point is that Jesus was talking about *so much more* than *just* money and talents. He was talking about *everything* with which we’ve been entrusted. OK, he *was* talking about money and talents, yes, but also about relationships with family and friends and with God and He was talking about abilities, not just the ability to play the piano or paint a portrait, but the ability to get out of the bed in the morning and to converse with our neighbors. He was talking about every aspect of our lives and our very lives themselves. He was telling us that all that we have – including our lives – are gifts from God. So, if all that we have comes from God, what should we do

with our lives? What should we do with the things with which God has entrusted each of us? Well, Jesus taught us, we need to use our gifts.

Why did the third servant not do something with the talent on loan from his master? He tells us, in verse 25. He says “I was afraid.” Now, he goes on about how the master is “harsh” and cruel, but the parable gives us no other evidence to back that up. Ask the other servants how they feel about their master and we’d hear a different answer. I think they feel pretty good about the master, so it’s unclear why this third guy feels the way he does, but it should go without saying that *God* is not harsh and cruel. So, why was this guy afraid? I think the third servant buried the talent because he was afraid, but not really afraid of his master. I think he was afraid of failure. He was afraid of making a mess, of being a disappointment, to himself and to his master. He was afraid that he’d go and lose it all, so instead he buried the one talent, knowing he’d have *that* to return to the master. And *that* is what the master condemns. Doing *nothing*. Burying our talents in the ground. Letting the gifts God has given us sit idle. *That* is what Jesus was warning us against. *The Message* paraphrase puts it like this: “That’s a terrible way to live! It’s criminal to live cautiously like that! If you knew I was after the best, why did you do less than the least?”

Jesus was telling us to not be afraid, to not be so worried about messing up that we don’t do anything at all. On the wall of a university chapel hangs a plaque in memory of a woman. On the plaque is this simple tribute: “She hath done what she could.” It doesn’t say what it was she did, or how important it was, or how many lives it affected, or even if it was successful. She just did what she could. She didn’t bury her talents, her money, her gifts, her life. She did what she could. This is a quote from Jesus, after Mary anoints His feet with perfume. In Mark 14, Jesus says of Mary, “She has done what she could.”

That is what Jesus is calling each us to do – just what we can. Are we going to mess up? Yes. Are we going to need some prodding along in uncertain times like these? Sure. Are we going to make the wrong choices sometimes? Of course. But in order to gain anything, we must risk something. In order to make the astounding 100% return on their investment, the first two servants had to risk losing every bit of the money entrusted to them.

God took a tremendous risk on us. God could have made us to always follow His will, to always do the right thing. He could have made us to be perfect, but He didn’t. He created us to have free will, risking the chance that we would turn our backs on Him. And *all* of us do, in ways big and small, turn our backs on God. And that’s the risk God took in giving us free will. And yet,

can you imagine the joy in the heart of God when we turn toward Him? Can you imagine the pleasure God has in seeing us choose to follow His will for our lives? It was a risk, but God considered it a risk worth taking.

And it's a risk for us to do something with what God has made us stewards of. When we speak of stewardship, we generally think of money. But stewardship is about so much more than just money. We are stewards of the gifts of God, whether they are financial, or talents, or relationships, or resources of the earth itself, or our very lives. We can choose to bury these gifts, but we know how God feels about that. God calls us to risk what we've been given for the opportunity to do so much more for the kingdom. If we metaphorically bury our money in the ground, there is no chance it will grow. With inflation, it will actually lessen in value. If we don't use our natural abilities, we will lose those abilities. If we do not cultivate our relationships with one another and with God, those relationships will wither. We have to *do something* with our gifts in order to receive further blessings. And in doing something, there is always the risk of failure. But it is a risk worth taking, for it is the only way that we can grow closer to our God.

No matter what the circumstances of any particular church or any particular life, the parable of the talents forces all of us to ask ourselves some questions. When we reflect on our lives, can we say that we risked ourselves for the good of the kingdom, moving beyond fear and doubt at the call of our God? Did we offer what we have in service of God and neighbor? Did we forgo the safety of the familiar to seek out the lost? In short, did we do what we could?

Amen