

# *Love for the Giver, Joy for the Gifts*

a sermon

by Dan Griswold

Trinity Reformed Church

November 19, 2017

Matthew 25:14–30

---

The Bible passage that I just read is one of Christ’s best known parables. I expect that all of you have heard it, even read it, many times.

You know that it speaks about gifts and the proper use of gifts. And you know that the way it talks about gifts is by telling a story about “talents.”

Of course, the talents in the story are money — a large sum of money, in fact. “Talent” in the time of Jesus was a measure of wealth, a quantity of monetary value, like shekels and minas, but more than these, *much* more in the case of shekels. It was a bit like how our money comes in denominations: various kinds of coins, then dollar bills, twos, fives, tens, twenties, fifties, and one-hundreds.

We used to have larger bills in this country — five hundred dollars, a thousand dollars, and even higher – but these, according to Wikipedia, “were last printed [in] 1945, and officially discontinued [in] 1969 ... due to ‘lack of use’.”<sup>1</sup>

So in the Bible that word, “talent,” meant money, a lot of it. But now it has a different meaning for us. When we speak of a “talent,” we usually mean an ability, a capacity, a gift. We think of skill in academics, or art, or music, or a sport. The talented wow us with their mastery and ease

on the court,  
or on stage,  
or in the spotlight,  
or in the research lab,  
or in the operating room,  
or in the boardroom,  
or in the classroom.

This change in meaning is actually because of this parable. It’s due to the influence of this parable on those many who for years have reflected on it. Even though it talks about talents, sure, as financial treasure, it clearly wants us also to be thinking of the gifts and abilities given to us. Finally, fundamentally, even though it pretends to be talking about money, it’s talking not just about money, not *really* about money, but about all the gifts given to us by Christ,

gifts that make us able to participate in Christ’s work,  
gifts for bringing glory to Christ,  
gifts for blessing others as directed and willed by God,  
gifts for carrying on the work of Jesus until he returns.

---

<sup>1</sup>[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Large\\_denominations\\_of\\_United\\_States\\_currency](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Large_denominations_of_United_States_currency)

But it's important to be aware of the financial meaning of "talent," to note how this story begins with a master entrusting his wealth to three of his slaves. This starting point is important for getting the parable, and for getting *ourselves* in the light of the parable, which is why these parables are there, to have us understand ourselves in their light.

And so, a talent was a really large sum of money. It was not a small thing. By some estimates, just one talent was worth, in today's economy, anywhere from 300,000 to half a million dollars.

Them's no small potatoes!

What this means is that *each one* of the slaves was entrusted with a great treasure. *Each one*. Even the slave given one talent had a great amount of wealth of his master's, to care for and tend and steward. That it wasn't two talents, or five, as were given to the others, didn't mean it was small. It was by no means insignificant.

And yet, for some reason, that slave didn't seem to think so.

How are the slaves to use this money? No instructions are given them, not that we hear. They are simply left with this responsibility, one that appears to need no explanation. But if we were to fill in the blanks, it's quite clear what they're to do: they must serve the interests of the master, putting his wealth to uses that would represent him, that would honor him, that would please him.

The first two slaves, they used the money they had been given and did great work with it. Each one of them traded with their talents, with remarkable results. Each one saw a crazy-huge return on investment of 100%.

But that's not what the slave with one talent did. He didn't invest. He didn't trade. He didn't think of ways in which he could use the talent so it would do some good. Instead, he dug a hole in the ground and buried the talent, hiding it.

The master returns from his trip. He has each one report. The two who had worked with the money given to them reported the amazing results to the master. He tells each of them, "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."

Then it's the third slave's turn, the one who had been given "only" (?!) one talent. And things don't go quite as well. Right from the beginning it doesn't go well. How does he begin? How does he start? This slave starts by insulting the master. "Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed."

Not a good thing to say. Not the way to ingratiate yourself to the boss. It's like saying, "Well, boss, I knew you were a pain in the neck. I knew you were one tough dude with unreasonable expectations."

That's how the slave *began*.

It went downhill from there.

"Yeah, I knew how tough you were, and I was afraid," said the slave, "so I hid your money in a hole I dug in the ground. I knew it would be safe there. Happy?"

Not happy. Not happy at all.

The master wanted his wealth to be managed, not hid. He wanted his resources to be used, not hoarded. He expected his slaves to advance the goals and interests of his estate, not give the impression that it had gone dark, headed for bankruptcy and foreclosure.

Yet wasn't there some risk? I mean, dealing with money is risky, the risks of the marketplace. I suppose, but in this story it seems that the characters were in a market that would make any businessman jealous. Returns of 100%! Unheard of! And that's the point. It seems that, in this environment, no one could lose. It was all gain, if they'd just try, if they would just make the effort to use what they had been given.

Even so, even in that amazingly favorable market, this third slave sat on the wealth entrusted to him.

He decided not to decide.

He acted by not acting.

He did nothing.

And what this do-nothing, non-deciding, good-for-nothin' said by his doing nothing was *something*: about how he viewed the talent and the master, and it said something loud and clear:

The talent was to be hidden, and the master was to be feared.

The talent was a burden, and the master an imposer of burdens.

The talent was not to be celebrated, nor was the master to be trusted.

Both were to be resented, viewed not as gift and giver but rather as imposition and tyrant, as annoyance and pest.

The slave doesn't understand the gift of the talent. The theologian and ethicist Stanley Hauerwas, in his commentary on this parable, says that "The one who received one talent ... assumed that the giver had given a gift that could only be lost or used up. In other words, the one with one talent assumed that he or she was part of a zero-sum game. Those who assume life is a zero-sum game think that if one person receives an honor then someone else is made poorer. So the slave with one talent feared losing what he had been given, with the result that *he tried to turn the gift into a possession.*"<sup>2</sup>

So the slave doesn't understand what was given to him. He doesn't understand that being entrusted with the talent was a joyful gift.

But he also doesn't understand his master. In the parable, no slave who had even a halfway decent understanding of the master and his business could think that sitting on the money would be somehow *okay*. Only one who understood hardly anything about the master, who knew almost nothing about his affairs, could read things so badly as this slave had. The only way he could think that sitting on the funds was the right thing to do was if he neither knew, nor trusted, nor loved his master.

Who does the third slave think the master really is? "A harsh man, reaping where [he] did not sow, and gathering where [he] did not scatter seed"??? Come on, now, what a completely wrong-headed understanding of the master!

What the slave shows is that he doesn't know the master. He doesn't love the master. He fears the master, and because he fears the master he fears and resents the talent entrusted to him.



---

<sup>2</sup>Stanley Hauerwas, *Matthew*, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2006), p. 210. Emphasis added.

I want to go back to those words, to what the third slave says about the master. “I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed.”

This is wrong. Especially if we are to understand the master as representing Jesus, this is just wrong! And that’s what the parable wants us to understand, that this is wrong.

Jesus does not reap where he had not sowed!

Jesus does not gather where he had not scattered seed!

Jesus is merciful. Jesus is just. Jesus is wise.

Jesus is the source of all growth and beauty.

With Jesus, his requirements are life, and his expectations are blessing. “His yoke is easy, and his burden is light.”

I think there’s something really important here.

When you claim to know Jesus but don’t really know him, the talent easily becomes a curse. When you don’t love Jesus, stewardship of your God-given gifts becomes an onerous burden. When you are ignorant and mistrustful of Christ the Giver, then your talents become possessions to secure and hoard.

Without love for Jesus, there can be no true joy in using the talents entrusted to us, but only fear, anxiety, resentment.

Without love for Jesus, you are unable to see stewardship of his gifts as pregnant with opportunity. Instead, this stewardship becomes a grievous burden, which one meets with anxious and frantic efforts to stave off death and destruction.

Without love for Jesus, investments become nest eggs for hospice care.

Without love for Jesus, we grip our gifts with miserly hands, where they wither from disuse.

Where Jesus is not loved, his gifts are hidden.

Where Jesus is not loved, his treasure is hoarded.

But when Jesus is known, where Jesus is loved, the talents he gives are seen as blessings, as opportunities, to steward, to share, to use in a way that reflects his love.

When Jesus is known, where Jesus is loved, the faithful and joyful use of his gifts yields tremendous fruit and results in outrageous growth.

Knowing and loving Jesus, we can live with remarkable freedom. We can live with profound joy. We can live eager to use these talents for the glory of God and the advancement of Christ’s way.

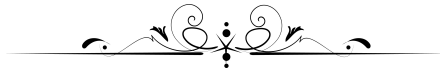
Love for Jesus is the starting point, the key element, leading to joy and blessing as we serve and share.

We won’t hide it. We won’t resent it. We won’t abuse it. We won’t let it waste away from disuse, or corrode from misuse. We won’t put it to ends that oppose the example of Jesus,

who loved the unlovable, and healed the sick,  
who forgave the sinful, and comforted the sorrowing.  
who told the truth to those who would listen  
and to those who would not,  
who pointed the way to God.

With each of us, the talents and gifts we’ve been given by Jesus are for these same things.

We, too, can love the unlovable.  
We, too, can heal the sick.  
We, too, can forgive the sinful.  
We, too, can comfort the sorrowing,  
We, too, can tell the truth,  
to those who will listen,  
and to those who will not.  
We, too, can point the way to God.



This passage leaves me with a yearning, a desire, for myself, for all of us.

I desire, for me and for all of us, that joy of giving. I desire a freedom and willingness for all of us, individually and together, to use our gifts and talents, tending them and cultivating them and sharing them, all of that out of the kind of love and freedom and joy that reflect a deep love for and joy in the Giver.

I desire, for me and for all of us, a wild and carefree splashing around of our talents, expecting a wild return of 100% on our “investment,” a playfulness with Christ’s blessings, rather than playing at a zero-sum game.

I desire, for me and for all of us, an end to our faithless attempts to secure our own future and the fear that gives rise to those attempts.

I desire, for me and for all of us, prudence married to trust, financial responsibility tied to hope in God.

I want, for me and for all of us, a flourishing of our love for the Giver, and a blooming of our joy for the gifts.