

### *Revisiting 'The Parable of the Talents'*

In Matthew 25:14-30, Jesus tells a story about a 'master' who, before departing on a journey, gives three of his servants some money to manage. He entrusts the resources to their stewardship, and when he returns, is delighted to find that two of the servants have invested wisely. But he is then upset to find that the third servant has invested very poorly-- even failing to obtain the low rate of return that a bank would pay. The master avidly praises the two-- 'well done, good and faithful servant'-- and puts them in charge of additional projects. But he strongly rebukes the other-- 'you wicked, lazy servant'-- and gives his resources to one of the faithful servants. In a word, Christ describes God as a CEO with reasonable but high standards who trusts His projects to His competent employees.

The passage in Luke 19:11-27 is similar in many ways, but with a few notable differences.<sup>1</sup> The primary 'moral of the story' is the same in both cases, allowing one to learn the same lesson from both versions of the parable. But the details and the context of the passages differ at points, allowing one to learn some different lessons from each version. And both stories emphasize a number of points which underline contemporary themes and encourage modern application.<sup>2</sup>

First, one should note that both passages are in the context of Christ's discussions of 'the kingdom of God'-- a concept that the Jews of that time widely anticipated but almost universally misunderstood, looking for a political Messiah who would return them to 'the salad days' of Israel under David and Solomon. Instead, Jesus meant the inauguration of a kingdom where his followers would be empowered by the Holy Spirit.

More specifically, the Matthew 25 version is book-ended by 'the ten virgins' waiting for heaven

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<sup>1</sup>Two other parables are cousins to these passages. In Luke 12:42-48, Christ describes a 'faithful and wise manager' as the one who does his job faithfully-- by treating his employees and his affairs with respect-- not knowing when the master will return. In Luke 16:1-8, Christ commends the shrewd manager, ironically, for cheating his master. The lesson is that discounting the resources of this world, in order to purchase resources in the next world, is a smart move.

<sup>2</sup>One should always be cautious in interpreting the details of a parable, but I'll try to discuss principles which appear here and are consistent with other passages of Scripture.

and an analogy using sheep and goats as a picture of judgment based on our time on earth. The context, then, is how individuals should behave while on earth. Thus, the Matthew 25 passage points to the importance of good stewardship of our private resources. In fact, managing one's time, talent, and treasure— in ways that honor God and love others-- is the most popular point made in connection with these passages. Clearly this principle also has application to the desirability of a strong work ethic, the importance of investments in family and other 'kingdom work', the Christian's call to engage in private charity, the usefulness of self-discipline in matters of personal finance, and so on. In a word, we are not to hide our 'talents in the ground'; we are to 'invest' our time, talent, and treasure wisely in appropriate arenas.

There are other implications as well. The very definition of 'steward' implies the perspective that everything we have is from God's grace. This promotes humility and encourages us to use the resources give to us as opportunities to honor God and exhibit God's grace to others. The passage also indicates that we are all given at least 'one talent' by God.<sup>3</sup> Thus, we are not to under-value ourselves or others. And we are to 'look for' the talents in ourselves and others— in order to be good stewards and to encourage others to be good stewards. This has especial application to acts of private charity where we are called to respect the human person and to work to build their dignity of those we try to assist— 'only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs'.<sup>4</sup> That said, the servants in Matthew 25 are endowed with different levels of wealth— five, two, and one talents-- implying that some people are bequeathed with more resources than others. Luke 12:48b soberly warns that 'from the one who has been entrusted with much, much will be asked.' In any case, the call here is to steward effectively whatever resources we have been granted at a point in time— rather than enviously focusing on what others have been given by God.

In contrast, the relevant context of the Luke 19 passage is that it follows the story of Zacchaeus— the corrupt tax-collector who comes to a saving relationship with Jesus. And when the master returns in this version of the story, the master's reward includes a commendation as well as

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<sup>3</sup> In Luke 19, the servants are given ten 'minas'. A talent was equivalent to two years of wages; a 'mina' was equivalent to approximately three months of wages. In both cases, the master asks for stewardship of a substantial sum of money.

<sup>4</sup>Ephesians 4:29.

administrative control of ten cities. Thus, the Luke 19 version seems to focus on the accountability that God places on those within the public arena with respect to their stewardship of public resources. In particular, government officials are called to steward their pay, power, perquisites, and public policy proposals in a way that glorifies God and helps others. Politicians are to protect the vulnerable and to stand up to the demands of the politically powerful. Bureaucrats are to be frugal and wise in spending taxpayer funds. Policy advocates must move beyond mere ‘good intentions’ to what, in fact, constitutes ‘good policy’— ethical and practical means to ends that are righteous and just.

There are other implications as well. In contrast to the Matthew 25 passage, it is interesting that the servants here are equipped with ten minas each. Perhaps this implies something about the equality with which people are to be treated in the political arena— as opposed to favoritism, cronyism, higher subsidies for some, higher tax rates on others, and so on. And it is interesting that the ‘wicked lazy servant’ in Luke 19 hides his minas in a ‘piece of cloth’ where the poor steward in Matthew 25 hides his talent in the ground. Robert Sirico points out that Jewish tradition treated the former far more harshly— since it was a careless approach that was more likely to result in the money being stolen. In the former case, the steward was liable for the theft, whereas in the latter case, the steward would be exonerated.<sup>5</sup> This would seem to point to the increased likelihood of public funds being misappropriated, stolen, or otherwise abused— and the need for stewards of public resources to guard against this possibility.

Both versions of the story clearly emphasize the significant value— in God’s economy-- of creating wealth and the travesty of not creating ‘creatable’ wealth. The master’s reply in response to his servants’ actions is strong in both cases— aggressive praise and ample reward as opposed to stringent criticism and strict punishment. The master’s reply is conditioned on their ability to assess risk, their willingness to accept risk, and their success or failure in earning a profit and investing resources wisely-- in a productive manner. And the master’s reply connects past success (or failure) with future opportunities (or lack thereof) to steward resources. This point is especially explicit in Luke 19 where the on-lookers unsuccessfully question the justice of the master’s decision and the reallocation of resources from the wicked, lazy steward to the

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<sup>5</sup> Robert Sirico, “The Entrepreneurial Vocation”, *The Journal of Markets and Morality*, vol. 3, # 1, Spring 2000: p. 15-16.

good and faithful steward.

A number of applications follow. First, although in light of other Scripture, one should not find license here to redistribute from the poor to the rich, this passage clearly indicates that one should be very reluctant to take resources from productive people to use for whatever purpose. Often, in the context of income redistribution, equity arguments dictate that taxpayer funds should be moved from the rich to the poor, but such value judgments are refuted here. Instead, the passage makes an efficiency argument— that taxes on the productive are not, in fact, productive for society. When a government pursues policies which impose large tax and regulatory burdens on businesses, entrepreneurs, and hard-working people, it does so at the expense of the common good— by decreasing the prevalence of productive, wealth-creating activity. In particular, our current policies of taxing corporate profits more than once and having higher marginal tax rates on those with higher incomes would seem to militate against the principles of this parable. Likewise, in light of this passage (and others), it is difficult to support harsh rhetoric against business, entrepreneurs, and those who are wealthy because of their hard work. If anything, the criticism here is of those who fail to do even the minimum with their resources.

Second, in both private and public matters, the passages point to the import of assessing risk and undertaking projects of reasonable risks. In Matthew 25, the good steward was bold; he invested ‘at once...[and] put his money to work’. But in both passages, the bad steward is driven by his fears. The good stewards, presumably, assessed the risk-- ‘counting the costs’<sup>6</sup> of his endeavor. Risk and return are positively correlated in markets; the ability to earn a high rate of return is a function of one’s ability to assess and willingness to undertake risk. For example, this is often a factor in the context of private charity. People are sometimes unwilling to give to others for fear that the resources will be misused. But while being a good steward involves assessing that risk, it doesn’t mean avoiding risk altogether. Likewise, politicians will often avoid electoral risks associated with supporting public policy reform. The parable implies the need to assess and take appropriate political risks, rather than always playing it safe and staying with the status quo. For example, politicians might be understandably reluctant to embrace educational vouchers because teachers’ unions are so powerful. But supporting the beneficiaries of a government-run

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<sup>6</sup> Luke 14:28-33.

monopoly against taxpayers and consumers-- against families and children, especially the inner-city poor-- is not an option for a good steward of public resources.

Third, it is an interesting feature of the parable that the master gives the servants complete freedom over how they use the resources given to them for stewardship. Apparently, they are expected to ‘put the money to work’, to bear reasonable risks and earn reasonable rates of return. But other than that, no parameters are given. Likewise, public policy advocates should be reluctant to regulate the ways in which people earn money— through work or investment. Prevailing-wage laws, mandatory licensing provisions, mandated compensation statutes, and child labor laws<sup>7</sup> all provide economic disincentives or legal prohibitions against some people who would otherwise work in certain jobs. And of course, ideally, the flip side of freedom is responsibility. The freedom afforded to the servants in the short-term ultimately results in long-term accountability. As elsewhere in Scripture, there is a tight connection between that which one sows and reaps.<sup>8</sup> In the context of private charity and public welfare, this puts an onus on the recipient. Although assisting the needy is a Christian duty, receipt of assistance is not a ‘right’, and recipients have an obligation to treat the gift responsibly.

Finally, the Matthew 25 passage recognizes differences in the capacity to steward effectively; the master gives resources to each servant ‘according to his ability’. It is noteworthy that the ‘one-talent’ servant is the one who fails. This underlines the difficulties faced by those with few resources— especially, a reluctance to take risk. After all, for those at the margin, risk is a crucial factor.

Two implications follow. Ideally, we should strive for a world where there are fewer ‘one-talent’ people. Hopefully, those with fewer resources can share in the wealth created by those who invest wisely. And presumably, policy reforms should target the poor in a way that enhances their skills and resources. The most obvious example of this in contemporary policy is, again, the debate over education reform. Too often, the current system results in abysmal educations for the

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<sup>7</sup>If it’s good public policy to have ‘Midnight Basketball’, why not also allow teenagers the freedom to work a few hours each week to teach them job skills, money management, and a work ethic? Why is it appropriate to have suburban kids mowing lawns and baby-sitting, but inappropriate to allow an inner-city kid to bus tables or moving furniture?

<sup>8</sup> Galatians 6:7-9.

children of the poor. Children of the ‘one-talent’ people often end up with, at best, one talent themselves. Instead, education should be the path to greater financial independence, more resources to steward, and a greater capacity to create value for others and for society as a whole.

And it should be obvious that public policy should not further discourage those with relatively few resources. Again, labor regulations are an unnecessary impediment to many who seek training and work opportunities. In addition, all taxes on the working poor should be eliminated. At present, the working poor pay Social Security taxes on every dollar they earn— both their share and some portion of their employer’s share. (The gas tax is imposed on firms, but who do you think bears the tax?) Thus, money is redistributed from today’s working poor to today’s non-working non-poor— a difficult policy to justify. And 19 states impose income taxes on those at the poverty line. Kentucky is worst in the country in taking \$550 from a family of four; Indiana is fourth-worst in the country in taking \$341.

‘The Parable of the Talents’ still speaks to us today— in religious and secular terms, in economic and social contexts— calling us ‘to be very careful, then, how you live— not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity...’<sup>9</sup> How we respond to this call is of great importance for the quality of life on earth and the quality of the believer’s reward in heaven.

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<sup>9</sup> Ephesians 5:15-16.