

A NEW LOOK AT AN OLD STORY 3

“THE TALENTS”

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There was a very cautious man
Who never laughed or played;
He never risked, he never tried,
He never sang or prayed.
And when he one day passed away
His insurance was denied;
For since he never really lived,
They claimed he never died!

Today we're going to address the subject of Risk, by looking at the main message of this familiar parable. Risk seems ever present in our world doesn't it? Who would have imagined in January what the stock market would do in the past 8 weeks, falling nearly 1000 points? It's a risky time to be investing in the Stock market. Who would have thought how different our world would be because of 9/11? It's risky to travel, especially overseas today. Who would have thought it risky that attending public school might result in death at the hands of a crazy classmate? Who would have thought that 2005 years after Jesus, His church would be reduced to cultural irrelevancy, largely because of her failure to risk? It's somewhat risky to be part of the church, not because of persecution, (at least in this part of the world), but because we are summarily dismissed as being out of touch, insignificant, pessimistic, and hypocritical. And who of us would think that we might be sent directly to hell, "do not pass go, do not collect \$200", simply because, and for no other reason than that we were unwilling to take a risk with our lives! Who would have thought?

This parable is really interesting. A "talent" was literally an amount of weight, not a certain coin or specific amount of money. We tend to think of talent as ability, or skill, or even a gift to do something well, and it's probably appropriate to think this parable might be about using our talents, and not wasting them. A "talent" in this story simply means a lot. We'd probably translate it like this: "A business person was going away and decided to leave his money to his co-workers. He gave each of them a "bushel of money", or a "truck load of money". The point Jesus was trying to make was that each of these servants, or 'slaves', was given a large sum of money. Some scholars have tried to calculate how much a 'talent' of gold, silver or copper would have been worth. It seems that in terms of money from today, the first guy was given a sum of money worth about 1.5 million dollars, the second about \$700,000, and the third about \$300,000. Anyway you look at it, it was a bunch of money!

There are at least 6 different principles I want to explore with you from this fascinating parable. Here's number one:

1. WHAT WE HAVE IS NOT OUR OWN.

"He called together his servants and gave them money to invest for him while he was gone." 14

Whatever else you say about this parable, Jesus is making it clear, and we miss it at great peril to our souls: that what we have is not our own. We may think that our retirement is money we have earned, and we'll do with it as we please, but who gave us the jobs to earn that money? We may think that our intellect, education, life experience, have enabled us to earn what we have, thus, it is our own, but who gave us our minds, who engaged our intellect? We might be tempted to think that even our will to work harder than the rest, or the resolve to save and the discipline to sacrifice, have given us this position in life, but who do you think made us??? Who do you think created us???

What we have, and who we are, are not our own doing. The gifts, talents, skills, and yes, even the money we possess, even the money we have already tithed, belongs to God, and we best not forget it. The servants in the story remind each of us that what we have is not our own.

2. WHAT WE'VE BEEN GIVEN WE CAN HANDLE.

"...dividing it in proportion to their abilities--and then left on his trip." 15

This is true both positively and negatively. Some of us are prone to believe that the hand we have been dealt is unfair. I'm guessing the 3rd servant entertained a thought or two that if he'd just been given what the first guy was given, he'd have been more able to invest it and make a better return, but the measly pittance he received was good only to be buried in the ground. That's partly why Jesus gave them each a lot of money.

I'm guessing that most of us seeing successful people all around us, might be tempted to think that if I'd just been appointed to that community, my church would be just as big as his, or if I'd been born with his silver spoon in my mouth, my company would be as big as his, or if I'd have been given her advantages, then my promotions would have come just as fast.

But we must see the other side too. What we have been given we can handle. There is nothing that life throws at you, you and God can't handle, that's at least partly what this story teaches us. I know that if we'd look around this room today, we could find someone whose life we could not handle. God made us the way we are, and God enables us to live with what life brings us. I know it's small consolation in the middle of difficult times, but it might be a gift from God, to remind you how much God loves you, or how much God wants you to love Him. I do know it's hard sometimes, but what we have been given, we can handle.

3. WHAT WE'VE BEEN GIVEN WE MUST INVEST.

"...he began immediately to invest the money and soon doubled it." 16

The funny part of this parable is included in these words. Did you notice how the guy went quickly to begin investing, and how soon afterward both the first 2 servants had doubled their money? You gotta wonder... how was that possible, especially in the first century. What enterprise would allow such a return in such a short time? And don't you find it interesting that the Master never asks them how they make all that money in such a short time? They just pat each other on the back and let the party begin. And did you notice that *'after a long time, the master returned.'* Now, if they doubled their money so quickly, and he was so long delayed what do you suppose they did in the interim? Suppose some off shore bank audit might reveal something? Suppose they siphoned off a bit for themselves?

We'll never know, just that when the Master returns he tells the two guys...you've done so well managing the Reno area, I think I'll add Las Vegas to your territory too!

I don't want to make too much of this, but I agree with the author I read that surmised that this parable might have been for the 'up and outer's', the wealthy and even the schemer who is always looking for a quick buck, that even that kind of shyster is not beyond the reach of the Kingdom of God. Those of us who work hard, and mind our business don't like to think about them...but apparently God does!

The more natural point is to remind ourselves, that investing is part of living, and sometimes that investing might involve risk. Where are you investing your life, and your resources? (ill: Char, Francis, DeNora are investing part of their lives in our kitchen every Wed evening, because they love to cook? Partly, but largely because they know their food, and the fellowship it creates, enables God to reach kids in SPARKS, and enables God to introduce lonely people to new friends, and enables God to introduce new truth from the study of His word, and enables God to reach youth and their friends as they explore faith together, all because of a peanut butter sandwich, or Hawian pizza.)

If all you are doing is padding your retirement accounts, it's likely that someone else will end up spending that money. Wouldn't it be better to invest it now and watch at least some of it return? Investing time with your family is never a wasted investment. Investing good effort at your work is part of God's design. Seeing your life and work as using your gifts, and doing your ministry, is appropriate in light of this parable. So is giving money, and remember the punch line...'to whom much has been given, much will be required'...! We all got much, and we need to invest it, wisely, and sometimes even in the face of unknown risks.

4. WE WILL GIVE AN ACCOUNT OF HOW WE HAVE USED WHAT WE HAVE BEEN GIVEN.

"...and called them to give an account of how they had used his money." 19

Judging by the way we sometimes live, you'd think some of us missed this SS lesson! I'm not much impressed with using the threat of judgment to motivate people, but we cannot overlook the blatant implication of this part of the story. We will all be asked to answer for what God has given us. We'll never be asked why we didn't win souls like Billy Graham, or sacrifice our lives like Mother Teresa, or organize churches like John Wesley. But we will be asked if we used all the gifts God gave us. We will be asked if we wisely invested the resources God made possible for us to earn.

We will be asked if we were the best dad, or foreman, or mom, or bus driver, or teacher, or salesman we could possible be. We will be asked to give an account for what we have done with what God has done in us!

5. WHAT WE DO WITH OUR RESOURCES REVEALS OUR VIEW OF GOD.

"Then the servant with the one bag of gold came and said, 'Sir, I know you are a hard man...' 24

This wicket is getting stickier! If we don't utilize all the gifts we have, all the resources we have, to their greatest ability and opportunity, then we are revealing how little trust we have in God. God has trusted us with what He knows we need and can handle, how dare we do less than what He expects? I know that sometimes we cower in what we think is humility, because we don't want to appear prideful, but what it is really, is a revelation of our lack of trust in God. If God has called us (and He has, all of us, everyone of us) then not to answer that call with the best we have to offer, the best effort we can make, the best resources we can muster, then to do otherwise, is to spit in the face of God.

There is a great scene in the movie, Coach Carter, where the coach is trying to motivate his players with the reality of what they have become. He quotes Nelson Mandela:

“Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate, our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. We ask ourselves who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous? Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightening about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It is not just in some of us; it is in everyone of us. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fears, our presence automatically liberates others.”

You are a child of God; we were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within each one of us. Not to risk the resources God has given us; reveals that we trust God, less than God trusts us. Let that not be said of us!

6. WHAT WE DO WITH WHAT WE HAVE BEEN GIVEN HAS CONSEQUENCES.

“To those who use well what they are given, even more will be given, and they will have an abundance. But from those who are unfaithful, even what little they have will be taken away. ³⁰Now throw this useless servant into outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’ 28-30

Whether you interpret this parable for the wealthy schemers who probably needed to know they were not outside the bounds of Grace, or the Pharisees who were consumed with trying to build an impenetrable fence around the law, by burying their lives in the past, in traditions, or in keeping rituals; one cannot overlook the penalty for burying our talents.

You see, in that day and age, burying ones money was considered a smart thing, a safe thing, a sure thing. Playing the markets, or the ponies was the risk. Even the master's indignity over not making the minimal interest of a Pass Book Savings account was against the law, they called it usury, and the OT law forbade it.

Jesus turns the natural and commonly accepted wisdom upside down! He says that following Him; empowers us to live above the fear of failure; following Him empowers us to serve with self-confidence; following Him, empowers us to take risks, even risks that everyone else might think stupid. Following Him empowers us to stand unashamed before the throne of accountability, because if we are following Him, we'll be the best we can be, and do the best we can do, with all God has given us, and that my friends...will be good enough!

Its easy, even encouraging to think about the 'blessed' fate of servants one and two. But, I don't want to think about the fate of this poor 3rd servant. So lets just remember two things...1. If we follow Jesus, we don't have to worry about this fate. 2. It's only a story, designed to help us think differently, and thus, to act differently.

Pray about taking risks!

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