

Parable Of The Talents (Part One)

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Following the Parable of the Ten Virgins (Matthew 25:1-13), Jesus continues without a break in His teaching to His disciples. This continuity of thought makes the Parable of the Talents (verses 14-30) a fitting complement to the preceding parable. Jesus is careful to balance His instruction by teaching another important requirement for His servants to fulfill prior to His return. He does not want His disciples to assume that the previous parable constituted His entire warning.

In the Parable of the Ten Virgins, Jesus reveals the necessity of developing inward character, but in the Parable of the Talents, He combines that need with the encouragement to manifest good works. The virgins teach us the need to watch and be ready; the talents teach us our responsibility to work until His return.

Jesus knew the human tendency to think that, because He was there in person, His disciples did not have to work, leading to laziness and freeloading as a person becomes dependent on the support of another. Thus, He urges His disciples, not only to be ready by watching for His return, but also to work diligently toward it. The first parable portrays the virgins waiting for their Lord, which requires mental and spiritual preparation and watching, while the Parable of the Talents shows the servants of the Lord working for Him, which entails profitable activity.

1. What do the various images in the Parable of the Talents represent? Matthew 25:14-30.

Comment: The wealthy man (referred to as "lord" by his servants) is "the Son of Man," Jesus Christ (Matthew 25:13). His journey into the far country parallels Christ's departure into heaven after His ascension. The servants stand for the twelve disciples and thus all the followers of Christ down through the ages, and the talents they receive represent the spiritual gifts Jesus passes on to His servants. The absence of the lord from his home pictures the absence of Christ's visible presence on the earth, and his return is Jesus' promised return. The trading that the servants are expected to do during their master's absence suggests the faithful use of spiritual gifts and opportunities for service that Jesus' disciples are expected to practice. On the master's return, he commends the servants, showing what will happen at Christ's return, when each Christian's service will be rewarded. The judgment on the one servant who failed in his trust is a warning against not using or misusing his gifts. [Note: The phrase, "The kingdom of heaven is" (verse 14), is in italics, meaning that it is not in the original, but was added by translators for clarity.]

2. What exactly is a talent? What is its spiritual significance? Matthew 25:15.

Comment: The talent was not a coin but a weight, and so its value obviously depended on whether the coinage involved was copper, silver, or gold. The most common metal was silver. The original Greek word for "talent" is *talantos*, which refers to quantity. As Jesus uses it, a talent is not something we possess, but which He possesses and loans to His servants. In the parable, all talents belonged to the lord, who entrusted them to his servants for use in trade.

Spiritually, the talents represent the gift of the complete revelation of God as given in the Bible, including the knowledge of His plan of salvation and the gospel of the coming Kingdom of God. It also includes His spiritual gifts to the church, such as speaking and understanding languages, preaching, teaching, discernment, knowledge, and wisdom, among many others (Romans 11:29; 12:6-8; I Corinthians 12:1-11).

What we "trade" with while He is absent belongs to Him. Our natural abilities are comparatively insignificant and of little value, but God has given us spiritual wealth to use by investing it in supporting the work of God. These talents, then, are not a matter of things we own or of strengths we have, but are part of the grace of God, provided for the church's benefit.

3. What is the difference between a talent and an ability?

Comment: God's gifts accomplish much more through some people than they do through others, as is seen in how much the lord bestows on each servant. Every true servant of Christ receives the Holy Spirit, but different servants receive differing amounts of spiritual understanding from God. We do not receive more from Him than we can understand and use. Because God's servants differ in aptitude, He accordingly bestows His gifts to each servant as He pleases (I Corinthians 12:11).

The lord knew the trading ability of his chosen servants, and he distributed his talents accordingly. Talent and ability are two different things. Talents are the spiritual gifts of the Master, while ability is power from our natural fitness and skill. A person may have great natural ability, yet no spiritual gifts. Natural ability, however, one of God's physical gifts, is often necessary for the reception of spiritual gifts. This was no reflection on the third servant because he only received one talent; he could not handle more. Each servant of Christ receives for his service all that he needs and can use (Romans 12:4-9; I Corinthians 12:4-30).

This parable teaches us several things. God gives people differing gifts. Work well done is rewarded with still more work to do. The person who uses his gifts will be given more, while the person who does not will lose even what he has. If a person uses a gift, he is increasingly able to do more with it, and a person who does not try is punished. The only way to keep a spiritual gift is to use it in the service of God and one another.

In Part Two, we will analyze the unequal allocation of talents, how they were used and misused, and how the servants were rewarded.