

## The Parable of the Trust Funds—Matthew 25:14-30

The actor Jim Caviezel first hit my radar as Jesus in “The Passion of the Christ,” back in 2004. Seven years later I re-encountered him in the TV show “Person of Interest”—in which he played an embittered vigilante assassin! “Jesus?!?” That ridiculous feeling of betrayal surfaces, less ridiculously, with today’s parable. Jesus?!? Is this You? Calling the third slave wicked, lazy and worthless, and consigning him to the outer darkness? Obviously he refuses to trust You, calling You a “harsh man”, and naming his fear, but Lord! If we know, You certainly do, how childhood or religious abuse can cause trust issues beyond personal control! We’ve never seen You treating individuals like this! Who IS God in these texts? Is the Master in this troubling parable not Jesus? Recent interpreters do suggest that. Context decisively disagrees—this “End Times” discourse of chapter 24 starts with Jesus telling the disciples about his own departure and return, then segues into four parables about that delayed return, extending through chapter 25. What are we to do with this parable, which seems to blaspheme the character of God in Christ? Who then is this third slave, misrepresenting the character of the Master?

Its traditional title, Parable of the Talents, also functions to obscure this Master’s stupendous generosity and trust in his slaves. I specifically asked for our pre-epistle hymn (God Whose Giving Knows No Ending) so that traditional interpretation would be in our heads. Just one “talent”—a unit of money, not an aptitude, attribute or skill as “talent” now signifies—was a vast fortune, a treasure equivalent to half a lifetime of their day laborers’ income. At the hourly minimum wage for Greenville next year, one talent equals at least half a million dollars. You can do the math for the first two gifts... Our modern English word “talent” comes directly from this Greek *τάλαντον* through Latin, Old French, Old English, etc. But the Church (especially this last millennium?) has so assumed that familiar interpretation as to build it into the commonly understood meaning of the word! It’s a hilarious, circular, self-reinforcing of this interpretation—also obscuring and frustrating. So could we more helpfully rename this “The Parable of the Trust Funds”? What do you think, what IS the vast treasure given so generously to all three, in varying measures?

I love studying Scripture, love experiencing the faithfulness of the Holy Spirit Who opens it when we attend, like a rose blossoming, or a dry sponge soaking up water. The poet Luci Shaw says that attention is something we pay—and the results of paying close attention have been breathtaking for me in this preparation.

I want to offer today an interpretation I’m convinced has validity. Most tellingly, it still comes around and stings me convictingly, probing, “Who are we in this text?” But I need you, church, in conversation. It’s disconcerting (and should be!), finding myself in a minority position with scriptural interpretation. I’m not completely alone though, or I’d ditch the argument. Please come to our talkback time, Sermon and Sweets, tomorrow evening and argue with me! Protect me from the risk of becoming, as Jesus named the Pharisees, a “blind guide”!

I’m indebted to Pastors Bob and Aye bale, whose recent sermons have paved our way. Pastor Aye bale cautioned that we are not the initial audiences of our readings. The Jews, the disciples, and the early Church fill those roles. We are not they; their worlds and worldviews are not ours; we can be blind to the assumptions built into our interpretations, and the differences from theirs.

The previous Sunday, Pastor Bob unpacked for us the history of the Pharisees, the hostility they increasingly show to Jesus across Matthew, and his snarky sarcasm in responding to their haughty critiques. This week I skimmed this gospel, searching specifically, for the first time ever, for mention of the Pharisees. Whoa, the depth of their hostility startled me, peaking as it does in these recent chapters, particularly chapter 9 through today’s chapter 25—and we’ve not yet reached the trial and crucifixion!

Two things pop out at me. A pattern emerges of Jesus' engagement with them; not once but twice, in chapter 9:11-13 and then again chapter 12:6-8, he cites the same passage from Hosea 6. In the first encounter, when Pharisees criticize his eating with tax collectors and sinners, he prefaces that quote with a stinging rhetorical rebuke, common in their theological debate: "Go and learn what this means"! (Like, "Only a novice would miss these implications"?) He quotes only part of Hosea 6:6: "I desire mercy ('steadfast love' in the NRSV of Hosea), not sacrifice." So, Jesus is insisting, relationship (with God and humans) takes priority over religious observance. Remember Pastor Bob's insights? That has to smart for these ultra-observant heirs of Ezra and Nehemiah, determined finally to "get it right."

Importantly, in theological argumentation their common practice, unfamiliar to us, used quotes to evoke a whole scriptural context, not just what was explicitly said. A subtle but clearly understood zinger, if you will. The entirety of that Hosea verse reads: "For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offering."

Then in 12:7, after the Pharisees criticize the hungry disciples' plucking grain on the Sabbath, Jesus rebuts with the same passage: "If you had known what this means, 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the guiltless." His charge of the Pharisees' not knowing God again lingers, unspoken.

But wait, the pattern takes on even more detail! Shortly after both of Jesus' rebuttals with that quote, Matthew shows us Jesus casting out demons; in each case the Pharisees respond identically, charging that only collusion with the ruler of demons allows him to do so! So let me ask, who does this particular gospel display misrepresenting the character of the Master, blaspheming against the character of God in Christ, failing both in mercy and in the knowledge of God?

When I considered that the third slave might stand for the Pharisees, troubling details began to resolve. It makes all sorts of sense that with this parable Jesus, speaking to the disciples soon to face persecution, and Matthew, speaking to the persecuted Baby Church, would encourage them by saying, "You've got this right, your persecutors have it wrong, stay the course, however risky, however long the wait. You will be vindicated!" No surprise, either, that we heirs of the Enlightenment, shaped and even poisoned by Western individualism, would default to an individualized interpretation of this parable. You post-moderns might better notice that automatic bias—we need your help with our blind spot!

This man's view of the Master also fits with the legalists' view of God as harsh, demanding and exacting. Our fear of "getting it wrong," too, can become a paralyzing refusal to step out in faith, refusal to trust in the mercy of God. In our brief Judges text, and its accompanying psalm, I was struck by the trust in the mercy, care and faithfulness of God that leads both the psalmist and the desperate Israelites to cry out to God for mercy. What a contrast to the misguided view the Pharisees here seem to have of God, as harsh, unmerciful and fear-inducing!

I then submit that the first two slaves could well represent the listening disciples and, in a sort of echo, the listening Church. They both serve as foils to the Pharisees, whose unbelief and hostility lead them into misrepresenting, blaspheming against, the character of the Master. To be clear, not individual Pharisees, but the Pharisees collectively, particularly their misleading and all too influential theological worldview, seem to be in Jesus' sights.

And what about the Master's response to that third slave? Remember, in this gospel we've already seen Jesus meet overt hostility with snarky sarcasm! "Wicked and lazy" do seem extreme, taken out of the context of the Pharisees' violent reaction to Jesus—not so much within it, though. In the last half of chapter 23 (which the lectionary omitted on us, alas), Jesus accuses them of "cross[ing] sea and land to make a single convert" and "make[ing] the new convert twice as much a child of hell as yourselves." He also directly charges them with so much other damage: laying heavy burdens on others' shoulders and refusing to help move them, locking people out of the Kingdom of heaven, and not only not

going into the Kingdom themselves but also blocking others from doing so! What a tragic outcome, to so misrepresent God that they'd actually block others' perception of God as merciful, and drive them away!

And the sarcasm drips: "You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest!"—interest being anathema to the diligently observant Pharisees, as proscribed in Leviticus. Even the ending of verse 30, "throw him into the outer darkness" becomes more understandable, with the requisite "weeping and gnashing of teeth", a familiar refrain from earlier parables—notably the wedding banquet parable explicitly "about" the Pharisees! Not that surprising, after we've heard Jesus say to them in chapter 23, "How can you escape being sentenced to hell?"

Let's continue to pull on the stray threads that bother us, details that still don't quite fit this interpretation. What is this vast treasure, which the Pharisees might have in some measure (vs. the others' much greater measure), but bury in the ground? (And that was considered safe, not ridiculous—analogous to our safety deposit boxes.) The unspoken part of the Hosea quote clamors here to be heard: isn't the knowledge of Who God is a vast treasure? God's gracious revelation of God's self to Israel was indeed a treasure—the steadfast love of God meant to be displayed to the world, but, if you will, hoarded and hidden in the ground of painstaking, exacting religious observance rather than shared and multiplied. We Christ-followers affirm that Jesus is the fullest, most adequate revelation of Who God is, or, in the words of Dr. Rebecca Letterman, "the most clear 'sighting' we have of God." So this group that rejects the gracious revelation of God in Christ Jesus certainly receives a much diminished treasure.

Dr. Kate Ott of Drew University muses along these same lines:

If the talents are God's grace, it is given to be multiplied! Paradoxically, sharing grace with those around us yields more. Grace multiplies to the recipient, for others, and with God's abundance. The burying of grace results in a diminution of it; concealing it results in rejection.

Similarly, Gregory the Great (quite a bit earlier) notes, regarding the end of this parable:

Whoever has love receives other gifts as well. Whoever does not have love loses even the gifts he appeared to have received. Hence it is necessary, my friends, that in everything you do, you be vigilant about guarding love. True love is to love your friend in God and your enemy for the sake of God. Whoever does not have this loses every good that he possesses.

The Pharisees bury the revelation they as Jews have received of God's love for the world, claiming it for Israel alone. Rejecting the grace of that "clear sighting" of God in Christ, they actively block that fuller revelation to others.

All this may be great geeky fun, exploring how Scripture unfolds, grateful for illumination that seems to clarify puzzling details. But finger-pointing at the Pharisees misses the point, doesn't it? Who then are we in this text? Having already acknowledged one of our blind spots, that bias toward individualism, let me ask: Who are we, collectively, in this text, St. Paul's? How can we pay attention to Paul's exhortation in our epistle text, to "stay awake?"

Do we know and rely on the grace and mercy of God, and extend it to others? We too might be blind to how "religious observance," in whatever form our besetting sin might take, actually overrides the mercy and steadfast love that Jesus prioritizes. We, too, might misrepresent God's character as exacting and demanding, perhaps adding prerequisites to full acceptance.

For example, might we, valuing education in our country's growing anti-intellectualism, fall off the horse on the other side into elitism? I find myself wondering if St. Paul's inadvertently adds education as prerequisite to faith. Does "belonging" to us only come with "getting it" intellectually with proper doctrine vs. trusting in the mercy and faithfulness of God? Ouch. Sometimes the Holy Spirit's questioning hurts!

How are we handling the revelation of the gracious love of God in Christ mercifully given to us? What might it mean for that revelation to be multiplying in our care? Is this a call to “witness more”? Well, considering Jesus’ critique of “tying up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and laying them on others’ shoulders,” I’m not going to go there, at least to the guilt I experienced with our legalistic heritage! And we’ve seen that focus deformed into a legalistic discharging of yet another duty on the checklist, “Well, I said my piece with the Four Spiritual Laws, I said the words, I’ve done my duty in witnessing and am not responsible for anything more.”

But do our actions, collectively, reinforce our words and put flesh to our witness to the grace and mercy of Jesus? What are the risks we accept in order to bear our witness and share His love? Perhaps we won’t face persecution, but are we even willing to get outside our comfort zones?

We recently learned of some followers of Jesus who seem, like the first two commended slaves, to be taking risks to bear fruitful witness to the love of Jesus, multiplying that love; they weekly spend time at a homeless day shelter, disregarding stereotypes of the “dangerous” homeless to sit with them as persons who want the same friendship and listening ear we all want. They are loving their needy neighbors as themselves and loving God through and alongside them with their presence! The grace which they’ve received so lavishly in Jesus flows through and “leaks out” of them, both in words and in actions.

One size doesn’t fit all—Greenville doesn’t even have a homeless shelter! But can we receive this parable as another Sunday’s invitation to prayerfully consider how we are, and aren’t, extending the love of Christ together?

That gracious, lavish revelation of Who God is in Christ, for us and with us in steadfast love, grace and mercy, is never more fully displayed than here at this Table. This is Who God is, what Christ has done for us, that we might become like Him. As we come to accept this lavish gift, may we find that grace also flowing on through us, to our desperately needy neighbors—multiplying grace and mercy to the glory of Jesus Christ.