

*Matthew 25:14-30 (NRSV)*

<sup>14</sup>For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; <sup>15</sup>to one he gave five talents<sup>1</sup>, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. <sup>16</sup>The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. <sup>17</sup>In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. <sup>18</sup>But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money. <sup>19</sup>After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. <sup>20</sup>Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, 'Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents.' <sup>21</sup>His master said to him, '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.' <sup>22</sup>And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, 'Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents.' <sup>23</sup>His master said to him, '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.' <sup>24</sup>Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, 'Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; <sup>25</sup>so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.' <sup>26</sup>But his master replied, 'You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? <sup>27</sup>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. <sup>28</sup>So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. <sup>29</sup>For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. <sup>30</sup>As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'

*Today, we turn to our sixth holy habit: giving. The question Jesus presents in today's parable is this: Do we give God our best in all things? Are we bold in our giving?*

Understanding the context of any passage is always important. Today's parable, often called the parable of the talents, is in the middle of what is sometimes called Jesus' Mount of Olives discourse, spanning Matthew 24-25. It is the last week of Jesus' life and he goes to the Mount of Olives, to the east of the temple mount, where he looks down upon the temple and Jerusalem with deep sadness. He looks ahead to the tragedy that will soon befall the Jews if they do not abandon their misguided way of being God's people. Jesus' words carry stark warnings and also set forth his expectations of his disciples after Jesus' departure. Today's parable precedes the somberly drawn parable of the sheep and the goats (Matt. 25:31-46).

*Use it or lose it?*

Before embarking on a long journey, a very rich man calls in three slaves and offers each of them a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Each will be given the opportunity to manage a portion of the master's wealth. Now, the master is no fool. He knows that the slaves vary in their abilities, as we all do. So the master entrusts varying sums to each of them. The most able slave is entrusted with the most money, the least able is entrusted with much less.

Try to put yourself in the place of the slaves. First, these *are* slaves. You will sometimes find this rendered as "servants" in modern translations and paraphrases. However, in the Greek, it is "slave" and the word highlights that these men have no choice but to take on the responsibilities given them. Second, each slave is entrusted with more money than he could

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<sup>1</sup>A *talent* is an ancient measure of monetary wealth and represented an enormous sum. It would take the average laborer 15-20 years to earn a single talent! The master entrusted something of almost unimaginable value to the slaves, even to the slave who received only a single talent. Though "Talent" is used in this parable to refer to money, because of this parable's popularity, the word "talent" came to be used in English to mean our God-given abilities. Though the master entrusted money to each slave, Christians have long understood that God entrusts us all with "talents" that we are to use to further the master's work.

imagine. The master doesn't ask them whether they want to be entrusted with this wealth; he simply places the treasure in their hands. The only question is how each will respond.

#### Stewards or Trustees?

We live in God's creation, which we might think of as God's house, a house for which we have responsibilities. Often, when we speak of our financial responsibilities, we speak of our "stewardship." In Greek, the word for house is *oikos* and the person who oversees the house, who manages it, is called an *oikonomos*. This word is used ten times in the NT and is translated variously (based on the context) as "steward," or "manager," or "treasurer" in the NRSV. Jesus tells a parable about a bad steward (Luke 16: 1-13). This is the story of a trusted steward who squanders the property of his master, which was a particularly despicable crime in Jesus' day. The moral of the story is something like this: use what you possess to serve people because everything you have was given you by God!

Though we usually use the word "steward" when we think of our financial responsibilities to God, Leonard Sweet suggests that "steward" is probably not the best way to think about this. After all, he notes, who really uses the word anymore, other than to refer to someone you might meet on a cruise ship! Instead, Sweet suggests that "trustee" is more meaningful for us and would be a better translation of the Greek.

Many of us have some experience with trusts and the responsibilities held by trustees, even if it is simply some sort of family estate. When we think of ourselves as God's trustees, the message of the Bible becomes a little clearer. We are given dominion over God's creation, not so we can rule as a tough or selfish taskmaster, but so we can be effective trustees of God's wealth, for managing it wisely, helping it to grow and flourish. God's creation is not ours, we don't own it; rather, we hold it in trust. We hold the Christian faith in trust and we are charged with guarding what has been entrusted to us (1 Tim. 6:20). We, God's people, the body of Christ, the church, have received a treasure, a trust, given by the Holy Spirit (2 Tim 1:14). This treasure is more than the "stuff" of our lives. God's greatest treasure is the truth about God and the proclamation that Jesus is Lord, and the question always before us is what we will do with it.

Two of the slaves step up to the challenge, go to work, and make the most of what the master entrusted to them. They give it their best. In fact, they each double the master's money. They are the sort of trustees you and I would want managing our money.

However, the third slave buries the treasure in the ground. He doesn't use it at all. Seeing only risk in the treasure, the third slave cowers fearfully in the face of his new responsibilities. He isn't really interested in serving the master, but only in his own security. So when the master returns, the third slave has nothing more to give than what the master entrusted to him in the first place. He imagines himself to be prudent when he is really squandering a master-given opportunity.

Not surprisingly, the master entrusts the first two slaves with even more money. But the third slave, the one who thought he was avoiding risk by preserving the treasure rather than using it, is stripped of everything and cast out into the darkness. The master expects that those to whom he entrusts his treasure will use it to create more treasure; either they will use it or they will lose it.

#### *Which slave are we?*

Luke also includes this parable in his gospel, but in Luke's version (19:11-27), each slave is entrusted with much less money, nothing like the vast wealth in Matthew's version. Surely, Matthew wants us to grasp the immensity of the gifts that God has given each of us, gifts that begin with the life of his own son. Nothing we might ever do approaches the generosity of God. He *is* the Lord of the Gift, as John Ortberg has put it.

The Lord of the Gift has given immeasurable gifts to us all. Like the three slaves, we vary in the nature and even the amount of the gifts. But, regardless of the size or variety of the gift that God has entrusted to us, the question is what we'll do with it. Will we acknowledge that all we have is a gift from God, or will we insist on calling it "mine"? Will we step

forward in faith, taking what seems to be risks so that the gifts entrusted to us do all the good that can be done? The slaves held the master's wealth in trust. We hold God's wealth in trust. Len Sweet and Harry Wendt put all this business about being trustees rather bluntly:

"When we place our so-called 'gift' on the offering plate, we are not giving God anything . . . We are merely getting our grubby little hands off what has always belonged to God. In short, we are not called to practice Christian giving, but Christian management and distribution [of God's creation], and this applies not merely to what we 'give' on Sundays, but to our total use of life as we manage this planet to the glory of God and for the good of all."

The question to me is pointed. Am I a faithful slave of God? Do I make productive use of all that God has entrusted to me? Do I respond out of love for my Master and a desire to serve? If so, then perhaps when it comes to the money entrusted to me, God calls me to boldness.

Granted, in a dangerous world it is tempting to focus on preserving and protecting what “we have” or what “we’ve built.” But God calls us to press ever forward, using well and investing well all the gifts that he has entrusted to us. It is revealing that when the first community of believers was threatened, they didn’t pray for God’s protection, they prayed that they would stay bold in the face of danger (Acts 4). So it is with our time, talents, and, yes, our money. We too are to pray for boldness and courage as we pursue God’s vision for our lives and for St. Andrew. This is a habit worth having.

### Connecting Faith and Money

At some time or another, most of us tried to separate the use of our money from our faith. Rev. Michael Reeves shares some of his thoughts on this connection:

“Giving is one of the core values of the Christian faith. As we consider the holy habits of discipleship, we would be negligent to overlook giving. But this holy habit often seems to cause us the most conflict. The connection of faith and money has been overwhelmed in our Christian experience with the church’s need for funding and the cultural birthright to be a consumer. Martin Luther put it this way: ‘There are three conversions necessary: the heart, the mind, and the pocketbook.’ This third conversion is equally as daunting as the first two. Recently a study was completed that suggested that of those who identified themselves as most committed to a daily walk with Christ, of those who said that they pray daily, read the Bible daily, and attend church weekly, less than half were committed to the tithe. There is apparently a disconnection between our faith and our money.

Today’s parable from Jesus has everything to do with our management of what belongs to God. Stewardship is not the fall campaign, the end of year appeal, or the upcoming capital campaign. Stewardship has to do with our management of that which belongs to God. Our management makes it possible for us to be in mission and ministry together. Discipleship demands that we not accept a lifestyle of consumption as normal. Some look around St Andrew and see many people who have been very blessed in material ways and feel that those most blessed can take care of the expenses of our community of faith. The fact is that there are many of you who are blessed and you have been very generous. But our response in giving has everything to do with building our faith and affirming our trust in God’s provision that paying the bills. In 2 Samuel 24 we have the story of King David who had been instructed by God to provide a special sacrifice for a particular need. He was approached by a well meaning man who offered him the elements to be sacrificed and David declined saying: ‘I cannot make an offering to my Lord that doesn’t cost me something, it wouldn’t be worthy.’ The fact is that even if the bills were all paid by others, it does not lessen our need to give as an expression of our faith.

So what do we need to do – what action is required? One thing you can do is to become more intentional about your giving, work toward the tithe, make a commitment to grow in this area of faith. Another thing you can do is to take a course in our Crown Ministry. That is something that everyone should do and there are people in the Narthex this weekend who are ready to answer your questions and sign you up.”

## READING WITH HEART & MIND, FEB 10 – FEB 16

How do these passages inform our understanding of giving, the sixth holy habit?

**Monday, Luke 19:27-11** I highlighted one way in which Luke’s version of the talents parable differs from Matthew’s. Are there others?

**Tuesday, Psalm 50:1-15** God’s treasure is God’s creation, including his people. The cosmos is God’s.

**Wednesday, Acts 4:1-31** When Peter and John are arrested and the community of believers threatened, they don’t pray for safety but that they would preach the word with boldness (v. 29)!

**Thursday, Philippians 1:12-26** Paul’s imprisonment doesn’t cause believers to be fearful, but has spurred them to “dare all the more to proclaim the gospel without fear” (v. 14, TNIV).

**Friday, 1 Cor 3** Paul is a master builder on the foundation of Christ. We are God’s holy temple and are to be wise builders ourselves.

**Saturday, Revelation 3:14-22** A message for the rich, but lukewarm, church in Laodicea.

## Sermon Notes

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### **Continuing This Sunday! *Exploring World Religions***

**Taught by Scott Engle at 11:00 in Festival Hall on Sunday morning**

This series is an introduction to the major world religions – but with a twist!

Join us any week that you can, as each week will stand on its own.

**This week: Judaism    Next week: Islam, Part 1**

### **Two Special Saturday Workshops coming on Feb 23**

Rev. Michael Reeves will be teaching a workshop on “How to Study the Bible” and Laura Zuber will be leading her popular workshop, “Higher Choices: Finding Purpose through Spiritual Gifts.” These Bible Academy workshops will be from 9-2 on Saturday, Feb 23.

For more information and to register go to [www.thebibleacademy.com](http://www.thebibleacademy.com).

## **Questions for Discussion and Reflection**

1. We are all comfortable with the idea that there are expectations of us at work or at home, but many of us get really uncomfortable with the idea that God has expectations of us as well. Do you agree? If so, why do you think some people don't want to hear about God's expectations of us? What are God's expectations of us? In Matthew's Gospel, immediately after the parable of the talents, Jesus tells the parable of the sheep and goats (Matthew 25:31-46). In this parable, the blessed are those who feed the hungry, clothe the unclothed, care for the sick, etc. In our busy lives, how much time do we make for doing the work of Jesus' disciples? How can bold giving of ourselves become a holy habit for us?
2. What holds us back from being bold in all our giving – of our time and talents and money? Can we be too prudent, too conservative as we seek to build for God's kingdom? Where is the risk-taking in your own life as a disciple of Jesus? Are you really giving God your best?
3. At the end of today's parable, Jesus says that the unfaithful slave is tossed “into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” These are Matthew's favorite metaphors for the fate of the wicked and stand in sharp contrast to the blessings given the first two slaves. If talk of God's expectations makes Christians uncomfortable, Jesus talking about condemnation and judgment really gets us squirming. Somehow, it can seem more Old Testament than New! Yet, the entirety of chapters 23-25 of Matthew is commonly referred to as Jesus' “judgment discourse.” Why do Jesus words about judgment make so many of us uncomfortable? Why do you think that Jesus finishes this parable with words of judgment? How could we think of judgment as something loving that encourages us? What *does* encourage you to be a true disciple, cultivating the seven holy habits?