

Do Better Yet Be
Matthew 25:14-30
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“Jesus” is a pretty popular answer to the question, “which historical figure would you most like to have dinner with?” There is a lot we’d like to know.

Tonight you will have that chance, not the dinner part, but the being with Jesus part. That’s because where the parables are concerned in general, and especially the parable we’ll hear tonight, there is not a lot of difference between hearing them now and hearing them in person. You see, in our parable for tonight, Jesus wasn’t really giving the disciples any new information; this is not one of those “the kingdom is like” parables. No, this one is one of the “this is what the time of waiting for my return will be like” parables. And in that type, the emphasis is not so much on teaching the hearers about God, but rather on provoking the hearers own response to the crisis brought by the parable. And the situation the parable describes hasn’t really changed very much in the last two thousand years. Jesus is telling his disciples that he will return, someday, even if he doesn’t tell them exactly when. They are to wait. We are still waiting. If something has changed, it is simply the expectation about how long we’ll have to wait. They thought it would be weeks or maybe months. We know it will likely be our whole lives, which only makes the question even more pressing for us. We have to plan for investing what has been given to us over a much longer term.

So tonight, let's pretend we are at Jesus' feet and listen once again to the parable of the talents. (Read Matthew 25:14-30)

Now you've heard the parable. So, which is it? Is God generous, or harsh? Is God out to bless you or get you? Discuss.

Wait? Not the right question, you say? You are quick learners. It's the wrong question because at this late date in the story, all the way here in chapter 25, Jesus is not still trying to help the disciples understand the nature of God. No, by now, Jesus has switched gears and wants them to reflect on their nature as disciples, disciples who will remain after he's gone, but to whom he's promised he'll return. And so he gives them this parable about what they are supposed to do, or maybe more importantly, be, in that time he is away.

So, the right question might be, since parables are never as clear cut as we want them to be, what are you going to do, or better yet, be, until Jesus returns? Discuss.

If it seems like you are doing all the work tonight, that's right. The parables of Jesus defy interpretation, at least one size fits all interpretations. You see, their very point is to put you on the hook to decide what *each person* will do, or better yet, be with their life. And the parable of the talents is a good example of this tendency of parables to leave a lot, or at least enough, to the imagination, for us to fill in the blanks with the details and futures of our own lives. The parables are

open-ended questions calling for life altering answers, and no one else can give your answer for you.

But so that you'll have enough to go on in your personal pondering on how you will do, or better yet, be whatever God is calling you to while you wait for Jesus' return, or your own death, whichever comes first, let me tonight offer a few tips for your journey.

The first tip is that this parable a little too conveniently conforms to our current view of ourselves, and whenever that happens, we should be suspicious. On the surface, the parable seems to suggest that working hard is a virtue in the kingdom, just as it is in our own time. After all, the two servants who did are commended, and the one who didn't work, and didn't even give the bank a chance to work, is condemned. It may be that we have become by our hard work what the parable seems to promote – risky, hard-working investors empowered by the Protestant Work Ethic – but more likely we have engaged in constructing the meaning of the parable in our own image. This is, of course, the opposite of the purpose of parables, which is precisely to explode our comfortable myths about ourselves and help us to do, or better yet, be something new. So, maybe, just maybe, it's not “hard work” that should characterize our time of waiting.

The second tip is that since the content of parable is about money and what to do with it, money and what to do with it are probably not the purpose of the parable. The amount the man gives to his slaves before he heads out on his trip is

an absolutely enormous sum of money, one that Jesus' disciples would not even have been able to wrap their heads around. The "talent," was the largest coin in the empire, worth something like 6000 denarii, or the wages of nearly a lifetime's work for a common laborer. It is not as ridiculous a number as the 10,000 talents Jesus uses in another parable, but it is still so big as to remove the issue of money from the equation of the disciple's futures. If they thought Jesus or anyone else was going to leave them that kind of cash, they were more delusional than usual. So, he must be talking about something else besides investing that they must do, or better yet, be as they waited for his return.

A final tip tonight is that despite the familiarity of the word talent, it is very unlikely Jesus is talking about our unique talents and abilities, or even the spiritual gifts we may have received from the Spirit. In the Greek of Jesus' time, the words for such things do not appear in this story and so despite how the "to each his own" idea might seem to fit nicely with the open-endedness of the parable, and that each of the slaves was given "according to his ability," Jesus is referring to something different than what each of us has to contribute to the common good.

So if it is not about hard work, or money, or the individual's unique talents and gifts, just what is it that the man entrusted to his slaves? Well, there is a very compelling case to be made that it is nothing more than, and nothing less than, the good news of the Gospel itself. There's a clue for us found in the punch line of the parable, the kind of scary, slightly, un-Jesus-like phrase that "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.” That doesn’t sound like the usual upside-down kingdom orientation where the last become first and the servants become the masters. But here it is, one of only two places in the Bible where Jesus says something similar. The other place is in the thirteenth chapter of Matthew where Jesus explains just what the disciples have received from him, and what others haven’t, when he says, “To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them, it has not been given.” And Jesus talks about these secrets of the kingdom of heaven in the midst of speaking about the very purpose of the parables, which as I mentioned earlier are to put a person on the hook for deciding what to do, or better yet, be with one’s life. There is very good reason to believe that Jesus is referring back to this earlier conversation about parables as he is telling tonight’s parable, linking what has been given to the disciples while Jesus has been with them, to what they are to use in their time without him.

And so the question becomes, what have they received from him? And why should some get more, and some have it taken away from them if they don’t make good use of it? Well, it seems to me that what they’ve learned from him is the good news of God’s grace revealed in Jesus, something they’d left their homes, jobs, and families for, someone they’d considered dying for, their pearl of great price, their treasure buried in a field, the content of all those parable of the first kind they’d

heard, those “the kingdom is like” parables. They had it all, the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, straight from the master’s mouth. It’s not something you can casually turn back from. What happened to the one who did? According to Matthew, he hanged himself, his thirty pieces of silver thrown about the temple courtyard.

That is some of the background you would have brought as a disciple to hearing that parable in person. I think you’re ready. You’ve heard the parable. The question to you is the same. What will you do, or better yet, be with the grace you have received in Jesus Christ? Discuss.

There’s an old Jewish parable about a soap-maker and a Rabbi. They’re out on a walk. The soap-maker says to the Rabbi, “Rabbi, what good is religion? What good is God? Look at all the misery in the world, what good does God do?” The Rabbi said, “That is a great question.” But then he didn’t answer it. They just kept walking along. They came across some kids who were playing in the dirt. The Rabbi said, “Look at those kids. You’re a soap-maker and you say that soap makes people clean, but look how dirty those kids are. What good does soap do?” The soap-maker said, “Well, Rabbi, soap doesn't do any good unless you use it.”

Amen.