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# Christian Oomph

Nov 16th '08 at Temple Cowley, on Matt 25 : 14 - 30

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## **Matthew 25 : 14 - 30**

*[Jesus said, “The Kingdom of Heaven] is like a man going abroad, who called his servants and entrusted his capital to them; to one he gave five bags of gold, to another two, to another one, each according to his ability. Then he left the country.*

*The man who had the five bags went at once and employed them in business, and made a profit of five bags, and the man who had the two bags made two. But the man who had been given one bag of gold went off and dug a hole in the ground, and hid his master’s money.*

*A long time afterwards their master returned, and proceeded to settle accounts with them.*

*The man who had been given the five bags of gold came and produced the five he had made: “Master,” he said, “you left five bags with me; look, I have made five more.”*

*“Well done, good and faithful servant!” said the master. “You have proved trustworthy in a small matter; I will now put you in charge of something big. Come and share your master’s joy.”*

*The man with the two bags then came and said, “Master, you left two bags with me; look, I have made two more.”*

*“Well done, good and faithful servant!” said the master. “You have proved trustworthy in a small matter; I will now put you in charge of something big. Come and share your master’s joy.”*

*Then the man who had been given one bag came and said, “Master, I knew you to be a hard man: you reap where you have not sown, you gather where you have not scattered; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your gold in the ground. Here it is – you have what belongs to you.”*

*“You worthless, lazy servant!” said the master. “You knew, did you, that I reap where I have not sown, and gather where I have not scattered?”*

*Then you ought to have put my money on deposit, and on my return I should have got it back with interest. Take the bag of gold from him, and give it to the one with the ten bags.”*

*For everyone who has will be given more, till he has enough and to spare; and everyone who has nothing will forfeit even what he has.*

*As for the useless servant, throw him out into the dark, where there will be wailing and grinding of teeth.*

One of Jesus’ characteristic teaching techniques was to teach in parables. Parables are a way of talking about God without talking about God directly; inviting people to work it out for themselves. Because parables are often stories, they do not always have a straightforward ‘moral’, and can be read in more than one way.

This parable of the ‘Talents’ is a classic example. Not surprisingly, it has been used to support the idea that only those who work hard deserve the rewards – people who are creative and work hard for the boss get rich; lazy shirkers deserve to get the sack. The servant who does nothing is sullen and resentful – not surprisingly he’s been likened to the militant unionist who hates the bosses and undermines the company from within.

But on the other hand, it’s been argued that the hero of the piece is precisely the one who stands up to the boss – and gets persecuted for it like all the prophets before him (including Jesus). Whereas his two colleagues make money by wheeler-dealing and exploitation (how else do you make 100% returns other than by buying cheap and selling dear?) the ‘bad’ servant knows that true wealth comes not from money markets but ultimately from the soil. His ‘planting’ of the gold in the soil makes the point!

So – two completely opposite readings!

Part of the problem with interpreting parables is trying to work out what each character stands for. “Does the absentee landlord stand for God?” is the big question here. Who is the lazy servant? What are these ‘talents’ that are given to the servants? What do they stand for?

A common interpretation has been that they are the gifting and skills that God blesses us with – ‘talents’ in the sense that we use the word today; so that the parable becomes a moral tale about using our gifts well. But the original Greek word here clearly means money wealth, not personal attributes. A talent was a very large sum of money indeed – something like £300,000 in today’s money. You can do a lot with five talents.

And these ‘talents’ aren’t gifts. I’ve read commentaries on this parable that speak of God’s generosity; but the boss in the parable isn’t being generous at all. At no stage in the story do the servants own anything. They are, in fact, slaves. Their reward for their stewardship is not big fat city bonuses and share options but promotion – greater responsibility and status in the boss’s business. As servants.

Is Matthew commending money-making here? It’s hardly likely. It’s Matthew who records Jesus saying ‘You can’t serve God and money’ (6:24); it’s Matthew who records Jesus telling the disciples that “it’s harder for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.” (19:24) and advising the rich man to give away all his possessions.

But Matthew is very interested in growth. Three times he records Jesus using the image of the mustard seed – a tiny seed that can grow into tree big enough for the birds to come and roost in its branches (13:32). But the mustard seed isn’t money : Jesus is talking about the Kingdom of God. The mustard seed of a tiny minority’s practical faith in the new society of justice and peace that God has initiated in Jesus is going to blossom and grow until all nations can come and ‘roost in its branches’.

There are two more clues that might help us get a grip on this puzzling parable :

- according to the resentful slave, the landlord is a hard and grasping man who reaps where he doesn't sow – and yet when he praises the good stewards he doesn't sound hard and grasping at all. He says “come and share my joy”. That's a funny word to use – it sounds much more like the party that is the Kingdom of Heaven.
- who is it that Matthew's churches are struggling with? Who, generally, is the target of his criticism? As I explained in a sermon a couple of months ago, Matthew is writing after the destruction of Jerusalem and its great temple by the Romans in the year 70. The heart had been ripped out of the Jewish religion, and many of the greatest teachers – pharisees – had assembled at a place called Jamnia to set up some sort of authoritative council that could provide leadership to Jews throughout the Roman Empire. These are the people, most probably, who are in Matthew's sights when he paints such a negative picture of pharisees in his gospel. It seems that Matthew's churches had been either refused permission to participate in that movement or, worse, had been accused of heresy and expelled. Part of the reason for that might have been the presence of Gentiles (non-Jews) in Matthew's churches – the birds, in the parable of the mustard tree? Matthew ends his gospel with a commission to ‘baptise all nations’ i.e. the Gentiles (28:19). Matthew's churches were ‘growing the business’.

OK, so here is how I make sense of this parable : the resentful, grudging, lazy servant who gets sacked is most likely that Jewish Council at Jamnia. And why do they get sacked? Because they've been entrusted with the mission of witnessing to the nations, growing God's ‘business’ of righteousness and justice for the poor and they've sat on their hands. For all their religious expertise, they haven't delivered the goods. Far from ‘growing the kingdom’, they've kept their religion to themselves and kept others out of it. They've hidden it, buried it

under a thousand legal requirements to confuse and exclude – not only the Gentiles, but their own poor.

And, Matthew says, that reveals what they think God is really like. Deep down, they do not love God. They do not think God is lovable. They are afraid of God – they think God is a remote, harsh master who demands sacrifices to stay off his anger – who ‘reaps where he does not sow’, in other words. A God who is more absent than present, who never praises his servants or rewards them, only criticises them and punishes them when they fail to appease him.

It’s not just the pharisees of Jamnia who have pictured God that way, is it? The God of much Christianity throughout the 19th and 20th centuries was often like that. Children were taught to be afraid of the hard taskmaster God who watched their every move with a cane in his hand, looking for every minor fault, who would suddenly appear round the corner just as you were doing something you shouldn’t. And far from growing the Kingdom, it turned generations away from God.

The picture Matthew offers is of a God who is looking for people to join in the great business that is establishing and growing the Kingdom of Heaven (the ‘kingdom of possibility’), who is looking for faithful and reliable people to entrust with enormous responsibility (see Mt 18:18). And Matthew is clear : it is not the great Jamnia Council but his churches of Jesus Christ – the new Moses – that are delivering the goods, growing the business and receiving God’s commendation. But at the same time he is warning them not to get complacent.

Where do we fit in that picture? What questions does it ask of us?

Do we love God and enter wholeheartedly into the work of the kingdom, or are we happier when God’s not around and doing as little for the kingdom as we think we can get away with? Rather than gladly embracing a Christian lifestyle and looking for any opportunity to reach out in the name of Christ and ‘grow the kingdom business’, would we rather not have the responsibility

that being a Christian entails? Just keep our Christian faith hidden, keep other people out of our private affairs? And when we see other Christian churches gladly embracing practical Christianity and growing apparently big successful churches, are we secretly resentful and jealous of their success, and feeling God's treated us unfairly?

Matthew is warning us that a Christian faith that costs nothing, that involves no effort, that isn't really interested in this Kingdom of Heaven business and prefers to bury its head (and its religion) in the sand is useless. Christians who feel that God's demands of justice for the poor mean rewarding the incompetent or lazy, who think that love for the outcast is an unreasonable demand (and so on) will find that a loving God might just confirm their low opinion of him and be 'unreasonable' enough to throw them out.

Matthew ends his account with a chilling comment. "Everyone who has something will be given more, and they will have more than enough. But everything will be taken from those who have nothing." (25:29)

As we've seen, he's not talking about money – although indeed that's often how it seems the world works. The 'something' he's talking about is – well, the only word I can think of to describe it is "Christian oomph"". That positive spark of motivation to be about God's business. That little seed of faith that is prepared to give God a go, actually put some energy into being a disciple of Jesus.

No matter how weak and timid the starting point, for every bit of prayer, thought and action there will be a positive payback, he says. 'Success breeds success'. But failure to respond to God's challenge breeds failure.

Many times, when I was a Synod officer, did we discuss this in the Synod team when talking about our churches. There's a 'virtuous circle' and a 'vicious cycle'. Those churches who've got a little bit of 'Christian oomph' deserve a little bit of Synod support. Those churches who show none – well, to support

them would be a waste of precious resources. But how do you know which is which?

Which are we?