

Holding Nothing Back

Maybe you have heard the story about the wealthy man who tried to take all his money with him when he died. He gave his wife specific instructions to bury him with all of his fortune. It's mine. I earned it and I don't want anyone else to have it, he told her. When he passed on everyone tried to convince the widow not to follow his wishes, but she remained steadfast. At the funeral, even the minister questioned her: how can you bury him with all that money? Actually, it was easy, she said, I wrote him a check.

The parable of the talents is about another man who buries a pile of money. There are four characters in this story, 1 master and 3 slaves. As with most parables there is a lot that is left for the audience to surmise. The parable tells of no specific instructions given by the master. It just says that he entrusts his slaves with his property while he goes on a journey. All he has is divided into talents, which does not mean a special ability in this case, but a sum of money equal to about 15 years worth of wages for an average day laborer. One is given 5 talents, another 2, and the last just 1. The first two so called trustworthy slaves apparently found some really good investments and doubled the master's money while he was gone. The third simply buried the treasure so that he could return it to its owner. But I can't help but wonder, what if the two slaves who invested their master's money, instead of doubling it, lost most of it? What if they were only able to return to their master a small portion of what he had entrusted to them? Would he still call them good and trustworthy? Or in that case would the one who buries the money be touted as shrewd for being able to return all that was entrusted to him intact?

Let's put ourselves in the master's shoes for a just a moment. If the results were as the parable describes them, with the two slaves doubling their trusts, we would probably react much like the master in this parable. They would gain more trust. We would reward them and promote them. But what if they blew it? What if they took some risks in hopes to bring more, but things didn't turn out so rosy? Would we hold them at fault? Would we blame them for their efforts? Our answer to that line of questioning, it seems to me, largely depends on our own relationship with our possessions. Perhaps the first indication here that this parable is about more than it appears is the master's willingness to part with all that he owns in the first place while he is on this journey. Who among us would entrust all we have to someone else? Perhaps we might entrust a portion if we think it will profit us, but let's face it, only a fool would give all he had away with no real assurance of return.

Is the master in this parable a fool or is he gracious beyond measure? That is a crucial question and how we answer it, Jesus seems to be telling us, will dictate the quality of our actions. Two of the slaves view him as generous, the third harsh. For this third one, the story turns into a self-fulfilling prophecy. Given an incredible opportunity, he did the very least that was required of him because he was afraid and doubted the motives of a master who entrusted him with more than he could earn on his own. He squandered his chance to really do something special out of fear that he would fail and be punished. Meanwhile, his counterparts, recognizing the master's incredible generosity and trust, made the most of their opportunity. Had they failed, could the master fault them? Of course, but his initial generosity seems to indicate that he wouldn't. The fact that he was willing to trust them with all he had in the first place should tell us all we need to know about the master.

The master in the story, of course, is God. God is the generous giver of all that is and part of what this parable shows us is how different our economy is from God's. As one theologian puts it, "God's economy is not based on getting by. It has never been based on the laws of scarcity, of supply and demand, of survival of the fittest...No, God's economy is based on an overflowing abundance for you and me, for every one of God's children...[It is] based not on skimping by, not on keeping the best for God's own self, not on doling out divine scraps of leftovers, whatever it is that won't cost God very much. How can we know? How can we be certain?...Because of Jesus Christ, [the one who spared nothing to show us that we worship and serve a God of boundless love.]"¹

But there is still one thing that bothers me about this passage; that seems to stand in opposition to this idea of God as the generous master. It is the conclusion: "To all those who have, more will be given...but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away." What I think we need to realize is that this is not a statement of God's judgment on the faithless. Nor is it Jesus' version of the rich get richer, while the poor get poorer. Rather, it is simply saying you get out of it, what you put into it. As one commentator writes, "If one trusts the goodness of God, one can boldly venture out with eyes wide open to the grace of life and can discover the joy of God's providence everywhere. But to be a child of the generous, gracious, and life giving God and, nonetheless, to insist upon viewing God as oppressive, cruel, and fear provoking is to live a life that is tragically impoverished."²

¹ Robert C. Dykstra, *Discovering a Sermon* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2001), p120.

² Tom Long, *Westminster Bible Companion: Matthew* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), p. 283.

Put yet another way the question this parable seems to put before us is this: are we creditors or debtors? When we act as though life owes us a living, owes us happiness, owes us a leg up, that in short, we are owed whatever we can manage to get out of life, we choose to live as creditors. But when we realize that life is a gift, and God the gracious giver, when we understand that the world doesn't owe us anything, but gives us so much more than we often realize; when we strive to make the most out of what has been entrusted to us and we make the decision to be content with what we have, be it a little or a lot, instead of always needing more to be happy, then we are living life as debtors.

Do you know how most wage earners respond when asked how much more income they believe they need to be secure and happy? The answer is a surprisingly consistent amount: 20% more. This means that the person who earns \$20,000 a year believes \$24,000 would be enough to finally bring comfort and happiness. For those earning \$50,000, the target is \$60,000 and so on. Or, in other words, people who earn 20% less than we do, think that if they would be happy if they can earn what we earn. Perhaps the most remarkable thing this shows us is that for most of us, contentment is an ever upward moving goal that stays just in sight, but just out of reach.³

In reality, contentment and generosity are not goals we reach, but decisions we make. We don't achieve contentment; we make a decision to be happy with what we have been given. Likewise, we don't magically become generous once we have enough to give. We decide to share of whatever we have, because we feel blessed to have it in the first place. These decisions come much easier to us when we are operating on the debtor side of life.

³ From Robert Schase, *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007) pp.113-114.

There is a story about a downtown congregation. This church, like many urban congregations faced the reality of homelessness right outside its doors. The poor and homeless would greet church members and staff as they left the church. At night, street people would sleep on the steps of the church. The leaders of the congregation had many discussions about how to respond to these individuals. Many members said, “We can’t just give them cash. They’ll just use it for liquor or drugs.” So they decided on a more prudent approach. They would buy vouchers and dispense those. They announced this to the congregation, in order to relieve the members of any sense of obligation. Everyone agreed this was the best approach, yet something about it still bothered the pastor. There was something he couldn’t quite put his finger on until one day, upon leaving the church he spotted the part-time janitor, a man who made a fraction of the pastor’s salary, give a couple of bucks to a man sleeping on the steps.

The next day the pastor asked him about the incident. The janitor simply reported, “I do what I can, when I can, because I believe everyone is a child of God, deserving our respect and help.”

“But aren’t you afraid he’ll just waste it on booze or drugs,” the pastor asked.

“True, he could do that,” the janitor replied. “But the way I figure it, once I gave it to him, he is responsible for what he does with it. I only know that I am responsible for what I do with what God has given to me.”⁴

⁴ Adapted from a story on pp.113-114 of Schnase’s *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations*.

As Paul writes, “God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that...we may live with him.

Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.”

So, really, we have no good reason to hold anything back!

Let us pray: Loving God, you want us to give thanks for all things, to fear nothing except losing you, and to lay all of our cares on you, knowing that you care for us.

Protect us from faithless fears and worldly anxieties, and grant that no clouds in this mortal life may hide us from the light of your immortal love, shown to us in your son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.