

There are many different ways of approaching our gospel text. It talks about money – very large amounts of money. The Greek word is *talanton* or *talanta* in the plural. Originally a *talanton* was a measure of weight that ranged from 53 to 79 pounds – or for our Canadian friends: 26 to 36 kilograms. Then a *talanton* was also a coin that represented all those pounds or kilograms of gold, silver, or copper. It was the most valuable coin in Jesus' day.

As near as I can figure out, one silver talent in Jesus' day would be worth roughly \$300,000 today. We can say that the master was very, very generous with all three slaves. He gave each of them a very large amount of money. Each was given according to their own abilities – thus “tal-ent” also came to mean “one's natural ability.”

A key difference between the first two slaves and the third one was their view of their master.

The word, “master,” is a translation of the Greek word, κύριος. It is translated, “Lord,” when used for God or for Jesus. It's likely that the master represents God.

The first two slaves understand their master to be generous. They also seemed to understand that the money that was handed to them was now their money to do with as they thought best; to work with it with the best of their abilities. They viewed their master as trusting them and their abilities to do what is right with the gift.

We don't know what they did to double their wealth, but that's what happened. I imagine that they took risks with the *talanta* they received.

The only other time *talanton* is used in the entire New Testament is in Matthew 18. Jesus talks about a slave who had a huge debt of 10,000 talents, roughly about \$3 trillion – and his master forgives the huge debt. People reading or hearing Matthew from beginning to end would probably remember that story.

One view of God is that God is extremely generous with his gifts and with his forgiveness. This view of God gave the first two slaves freedom to use their abilities to work with the gift to gain an increase.

The third slave said: “Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow and gathering where you did not scatter, so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.”¹

He views the master as harsh. He acts out of fear of his master. He is right. The master was harsh to him with his criticism and punishment because he deserved it.

“You wicked and lazy slave!” the master says. This slave is lazy, or literally, he shrinks from **work**. In contrast to this, we are told earlier that the first slave **worked** with his money. Our translation used “traded.” The first two slaves worked. The third was lazy – sort of.

“Work smarter, not harder,” is a theme in a book on church life. It took some for the third slave to dig a hole in the ground to bury the money and then later to dig it up. Working hard at doing the wrong thing is not working very smart. This author thinks that this happens often in churches. Members, very well-meaning and devoted members, may work very hard; but if they are working hard at the wrong thing, that's not working very smart. It is the task of church

¹ Matthew 25:24b-25

leadership to help us all work – and work in smart ways that produce good results and helps grow God’s kingdom.

From another biblical story, the disciples had to work hard to bring in the nets full of fish. Lazy people wish God would just make the fish jump into the boat without any work on their part. I’ve found many people want God to grow their congregation by making fish jump into the boat with no work on their part. It doesn’t work that way.

I have found a lot of good, hard workers in this congregation – and they are working at the right things. There is a good quality about the people and programs here that can attract new people to this congregation.

A second problem with the third servant was that he didn’t even act on his beliefs. He believed his master wanted an increase – reaping where he didn’t sow – but he did nothing to have the money grow. Even the small interest from a bank would be better than the nothing he got from burying it in the ground.

I’ve said a number of times, but you probably didn’t hear me say it when I was in Arizona, that the real question we need to ask is not, “What do you believe about God?” but, “What difference does your belief about God make in your lives?” The third slave had a belief about his master, but he didn’t let that belief make any difference in his life. He let fear control him. He did what was common at that time – preserve money by burying it. There was no chance of it decreasing in value in the stock market.

In contrast to the fear and judgment that the third slave felt, the first two are invited into “the joy of their master.” When we view God as a happy, generous, gracious, forgiving master, we act differently than if we view God as a harsh, judgmental, punishing master. I’ve found Christians tend to act towards others in the same way that they view God; either happy, gracious, and forgiving; or harsh, judgmental, and punishing. What we believe affects how we act. The third slave believed and acted poorly. God was harsh, judgmental, and punished him.

While this parable centers on what the slaves did with a large amount of money – I don’t think Jesus told it as an encouragement to put all our personal savings into lottery tickets. The parable is about how you view God and how you let that view of God affect what you do with your whole life, how you treat others, and what you do with the gift of the Gospel.

A favorite quote of mine illustrates this contrast.

If we are ever to enter fully into the glorious liberty of the [children] of God, we are going to have to spend more time thinking about freedom than we do. The church, by and large, has had a poor record of encouraging freedom. She has spent so much time inculcating [“to teach by repeated instruction”] in us the fear of making mistakes that she had made us like ill-taught piano students; we play our songs, but we never really hear them, because our main concern is not to make music, but to avoid some flub that will get us in dutch.²

The third slave was certainly afraid of some flub that would get him into dutch – and his actions did get him into dutch. We cannot escape the fact that God judges sin – and judges it harshly. However, God is even more willing to forgive sins of those who repent. We are told that

² Robert Capon, *Between Noon and Three*, p. 148

all of heaven is filled with joy when sinners repent. Martin Luther could even encourage a friend, “Sin boldly, knowing that grace abounds all the more.” This isn’t a command to go out and do all kinds of evil, but to take risks; to use our best judgment in using and sharing the gifts and talents that God has given us: most of all, the gracious gift of the Gospel.

We are going to make mistakes in our lives. There’s no doubt about that. We believe that our God is a gracious God who is more than willing to forgive all of our mistakes. With that view of God, we can be like musicians who just love to play their music regardless of the mistakes they make – and I find that their joyful playing brings happiness to others – at the same time, like the first two slaves, we can work and train and practice to increase our ability to play with fewer mistakes.

We are to take risks to share the gospel of God with others. Hiding this treasure in the ground doesn’t do anyone any good. Hiding the treasure within these walls doesn’t do our community much good. Jesus Christ was given to us not only for our own benefit, but to share him with others. From the beginning with Abraham, God blessed people so that they could bless others. They were not to keep it for themselves. We have been given the gift of the gospel. We are to share it not hide it.