



Parables of Jesus

The Talents

23 February 2020

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1 Thessalonians 5: 1–11 Matthew 25: 14–30

The famous Parable of the Talents has enjoyed a rich and varied afterlife in our public discourse. Margaret Thatcher was known to be partial to this story, seeing in it a decisive warrant for her political and economic policies. ‘Creating wealth’, she once argued on the basis of this very text to the movers and shakers of the financial world, ‘Creating wealth must be seen as a Christian obligation’. But the Parable of the Talents makes a surprising appearance not only in the world of big business, but also closer to home, in academia. It is often said that the system of academic rewards and opportunities is governed by the so-called Matthew principle. For unto every one that hath funding, more shall be given, and he shall have an abundance. And unto every one that hath citations, even more shall accrue, and he, too, shall have an abundance.

Regardless of where you stand on the ultimate fairness of the Matthew principle in academia, it is not difficult to see how it can be more than a little unsettling to discover that the Kingdom of Heaven, apparently, operates according to the same ruthless logic.

The poor get poorer, while the rich get richer, seemingly by divine fiat. Does God truly reward the rich, making them ever richer, and condemn the poor, making them ever poorer?

Even if you go along with another common interpretation of this parable – namely, that the mysterious talents on which the servants’ fate depends refer to our natural abilities and gifts rather than money – I don’t think God is entirely off the hook either. Are we really to understand that God favours a kind of pressure-cooker examination system – a never-ending heavenly Tripos, in which even a single mediocre essay can cost you very dearly indeed?

The painting by Willem de Poorter,¹ a Dutch Golden Age artist and a contemporary of Rembrandt, gives voice to these common perceptions of the parable. The master, exuding dignity and gravity, sits in his armchair. We catch a glimpse of his baggage – he has just returned from a long and taxing journey to a far country. But the crucial piece of the puzzle is hidden away in the shadowy background. The two figures lurking in the back are the master’s wife and father. They are nowhere to be found in the parable, but de Poorter cleverly invents them to shine a light on the personality and character of the master. The stern master means business. Before greeting his waiting family, whom he presumably has not seen for a very long time, the master attends to his business and settles accounts with his servants.

¹ [Willem de Poorter \(1608–68\), *The Parable of the Talents or Minas*, Národní Galerie, Prague](#)

So, what are we to make of this difficult and perplexing story? Well, at first glance, a lot seems to hinge on how we understand the word 'talent'. But as becomes a parable, the identity of this talent is sufficiently puzzling and enigmatic, and it is not at all clear what exactly it stands for. In its most basic sense, the talent is an ancient weight unit for commerce, and it suggests a very large quantity. The key literary function of the talents here, it would appear, is to show that what is being passed around between the master and the servants is an abundance – a superabundance in fact. But to go beyond this and become fixated on the talents is to miss the point, especially as soon as we take their meaning, as we are prone to, in the direction of 'stuff' rather than the true divine gifts, such as love and life, truth and mercy.

Instead, we may fare better if we pay attention to what is happening to the talents. What is in focus is the action rather than the object. And most sermons on this parable tend to revolve around the idea of giving. That is the main action, and the moral of the story is that we are called to give – give time, talent, and money and in this way gain more for the master. But I want to suggest that the operative verb in this parable is not so much 'to give' as it is 'to receive'. It is a story about right receiving more than right giving. This is not to deny that this parable has a lot to say about giving, but it is to suggest that it is not primarily about it. Of course, in our culture, obsessed as it so often is with getting, taking, and grasping, the emphasis on giving comes as a welcome corrective. But at the heart of the Parable of the Talents lies a failure of receiving more than a failure of giving. And to our world, enamoured as it often is with ideals of radical and absolute self-sufficiency, this is an important, if challenging, message.

To receive is to be human. All that the servants have they have received from their master. The incredible wealth they suddenly come into belongs to the master. It is granted and taken away at the master's command. This state of dependence, of receiving, is, of course, a fitting metaphor for a lot of human life. We do not choose to be born. We receive life. We do not choose our parents or our families. We receive them. We do not choose where and when to be born.

Receiving is also a fitting metaphor for Christian life. 'We love because he first loved us,' says John. 'Receive the kingdom of God like a little child', we read in Mark.

But receiving is as much about human poverty as it is about divine largess. The master is nothing if not generous – there is a superabundance of gifts. Not only is he generous towards the servants, but he also trusts them. He hands his wealth over to his servants for a very long time without mistrusting or micromanaging them. In so doing, he invites them to participate in this superabundance, to enjoy it, as he does again after he comes back. The master, then, conducts himself in an attitude of extravagant generosity and complete trust.

We often assume that the third servant failed to give, and, of course, that is very much the case. But at the root of his failure to give is his failure to receive. There is, to be sure, a sense in which he receives the talent – he obviously takes it from the master – but in reality, he clearly rejects it, burying it in the ground. The servant's words are quite instructive, with his unjust accusations saying more about him than they do about the master. The third servant has failed to recognise the manifest generosity of his master and to receive the wonderful opportunities for fruitfulness offered as a gift to him. Why? Perhaps because to receive is to be vulnerable and dependent. In receiving, there is a risk of being wounded, hurt, and abandoned. In receiving, there can be loss and suffering. There is, too, a possibility of being changed, of a new reality, a new variable, entering our lives. In the end, the third servant prefers to put up a wall around him. He does not want to take any chances.

We are often a bit like the third servant. Our perennial temptation is to be in denial about our dependence on each other, on the communities around us, let alone God. We refuse to receive help from others, because we do not think we need it or perhaps because we do not want to be seen to need it. We refuse to receive love, because we think ourselves unlovable. We refuse to receive friendship out of the fear of being hurt and wounded. We refuse to receive advice, because we live by a hermeneutic of suspicion. What's the catch? By and large, we would much rather give than receive, because we are firmly in control when we give, but not when we receive. Receiving a gift is not an easy task.

There is, I am sure, a psychological point to be made here. But the argument of our parable is more ontological, if you will. Our identity as human beings is, by its very nature, incomplete rather than self-sufficient. Human life is as much about finitude as it is about plenitude, about receiving as it is about giving, about being dependent as it is about being in control.

For unto every one that hath received more shall be given, and he shall have abundance: but from him that hath not received even that which he hath shall be taken away.

Put differently, human beings are a bit like soil. Unless we are prepared to acknowledge our dependence and receive, we will become like dry soil, barely able to absorb any water. Ultimately, dry soil will lose even the little moisture that it does have. But the one who does receive, who does not labour under the illusion of self-sufficiency, is like wet soil, able to absorb more and more water, which eventually bubbles up to the surface, overflowing and giving water to others.

So we may well have to return to the painting by de Poorter with fresh eyes and perhaps even start interpreting it against the grain of what the painter intended. Is the master really a harsh and no-nonsense businessman in a hurry to settle accounts? Or is he more like the Prodigal Son's Father – a loving and generous master who returns to see whether his love has been received, whether a relationship has been established, whether he can pour out more love upon his servants, and whether he can share his happiness with others?