

14 'For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; ¹⁵to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. ¹⁶The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. ¹⁷In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. ¹⁸But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money. ¹⁹After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. ²⁰Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, "Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents." ²¹His master said to him, "Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master." ²²And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, "Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents." ²³His master said to him, "Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master." ²⁴Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, "Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; ²⁵so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours." ²⁶But his master replied, "You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? ²⁷Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. ²⁸So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. ²⁹For 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. ³⁰As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

Matthew 25:14-30 NRSV

Do you feel that there is something wrong with that parable? We love an underdog, don't we? When a little team plays a big one in the FA cup and wins, all the neutrals cheer, it makes the headlines, and we look to see if they get Manchester United in the next round, so all of those stars have to change in a portacabin, rather than their usual fancy nice facilities. We even call results like that giant-killing, which is perhaps a nod to the story of the young man David defeating the huge warrior Goliath – the ultimate story of the victory of an underdog.

So, when it comes to Jesus, we expect him to do the same – and usually he does. When the self-righteous Pharisee and the dodgy tax-collector go to pray, it is the tax collector who is justified (Luke 18:9-14). When he tells the parable of how a man is ambushed on the road to Jericho, the high-status people go past; it is the Samaritan who stops to offer compassion (Luke 10:25-37). Surely Jesus is going to bring down the man who is given the most and is bound to be a bit full of himself. Here we would be expecting Jesus to be his champion. It should be the man with the 5 talents that gets it wrong and is sent away, not the little guy with 1. However, if we are hoping for an underdog story here, we will be disappointed.

First, we need to clear up a cause for confusion in the story as we have it. In modern English we use the word 'talent' to refer to a skill or an ability. However, it is a translation here of a Greek word – *talanton* – which was a unit of exchange. That is why the passage actually refers to money at the end of verse 18. Some ancient sources say a 'talent' was worth six thousand denarii – or six thousand days' wages, so Jesus is illustrating his story with huge sums of money.

The parable is one of a series that are grouped together in Matthew's gospel, which are all about waiting in one way or another. Before this we have had parables about:

- The homeowner and the thief – an encouragement to be watchful.

- The two servants – readiness and acting rightly
- 5 wise and 5 foolish virgins – readiness and doing their duty properly

Here the question is how the three slaves used what had been entrusted to them. It is also worth noting that this parable is silent about whether slavery is bad or not; it simply uses something which would be all too familiar to illustrate a point about the Kingdom of Heaven.

We need to ask what went wrong for the third slave, or perhaps it is better to ask what went right in the first two cases.

The first two slaves fully embrace the responsibility that they have been given. They head off “at once” and being enterprising they double their money before their master returns after a long time. They are richly rewarded in two ways. First, they are entrusted with more - affirming their skills and their character. Second, they are told they will share in their master’s joy. Joy in the New Testament is a big word and describes the response we feel when the reality of God’s grace really dawns on us. Not just a passing happiness, but an enduring contentedness and peace.

Meanwhile the man with one talent (still 20 years wages, remember!) has done nothing but bury it in the ground. At the reckoning later, he simply gives back what he was given to look after.

That leaves us asking why Jesus describes the master reacting like he did? What is Jesus trying to teach his listeners? I think there are several reasons:

- When the master entrusted the slave with his talent, there was an expectation that he would do something with it. In that sense he failed in his responsibilities. Great trust had been placed in him – even with one talent.
- Given that it is a long time, the value of the money would have declined. He made no attempt to maintain its value – even by getting what interest he could from the bankers. (Jews could earn interest from Gentiles, and moderate interest from each other, which was distinguished from usury, which was forbidden in the Old Testament) Roman law set maximum interest at 12%, by the way! So just by burying the money, he has made a loss for his master.
- He is also called lazy. He claims his inaction is out of fear, but when he returns the money he effectively says have it back. The trust placed in him should have affirmed him; it was an opportunity for him to show what he could do. Not many slaves got a break like that, but he didn’t even try. In fact, the way Jesus depicts the master, you end up feeling he would have preferred this man to have tried and failed than not to have tried at all. He seems to have been surprisingly generous and gracious with the other two.

And so, he ends up ‘outside’. We should note that he is not beaten or tortured. There are no demons prodding him with pitchforks. The main point about references to wailing and gnashing of teeth is about missed opportunity and regret. The story depicts a man who was given a long period of time to prove himself. Any kind of attempt to build on what was entrusted to him would have made the difference. In that sense he is in a hell of his own making.

But we must remember that this is a parable, not a report! Jesus told it, and Matthew preserved it to encourage and challenge us, not to make us feel that must be our fate! The Christian life has never been about waiting passively for Jesus to come back (which was a problem in the early church). We all have much entrusted to us, in many kinds of ways. Are we afraid to try? Do we fear failure? Or are we going to embrace whatever opportunities we are presented with to use, develop, and grow all that God has entrusted to us, in faith that we will share his joy?