



ELIZABETHTOWN
CHURCH OF THE BRETHREN

PRACTICING PEACE, SERVICE AND OPENNESS TO ALL

What's in your wallet?
Part 2 of 2

Matthew 25.14–30

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Message from April 15, 2018

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WHAT'S IN YOUR WALLET?

Last week we talked about some of the reasons why we give: To show thanks and gratitude, out of a sense of responsibility, to express love, to support things we believe in, because it's what we've been taught. Because it feels good. **I opened up my wallet, so to speak, and talked about my family's approach to giving, what we give, and the places we have now challenged ourselves to improve.**

And we discussed how often the Bible talks about money. In the Hebrew Bible, the concept of giving a tithe—10% of one's income—is practiced early and often. In the New Testament Jesus taught money more than heaven or hell. He talked about the spiritual toll that money and possessions can take on our lives.

Today, we will actually go broader than the wallet to consider our lives and everything that is in them as a gift that we must thoughtfully steward. Ugh, there it is. That word stewardship.

I CAN'T STAND THE WORD STEWARDSHIP

I'll admit that part of it is that I'm not a big fan of code words. One of my favorite quotes, taped to the shelf in my study, is *"Say what you mean, and mean what you say. Just don't say it mean."* Some of these codewords are silly. We all know at least a few, right? That child is, uh, "challenging". That guy is really, what's the word I'm looking for...interesting. Stewardship has been used a code word for money.

Stewardship, though, can be a life-altering concept, that can totally change how we think about money and wealth, our Christian call and our civic duties, our time and our lives. By definition, a steward is someone who takes care of something. Notice that the word *ownership* is not in that definition.

2 Here's what I'm going to ask of you today. It's difficult. It's not what society tells us to do. But it is holy. Rather than think of ourselves as the owners of that which is in our possession, think of yourself as the caretaker of these things, if just for a short while. Things that have predated us, and will live long after us. Today, I ask you to think about that which has been entrusted to you. To us.

Thinking of ourselves as stewards rather than owners of the stuff of the world casts things in a much different light. Again, the Bible has a lot to share with us. About 50% of Jesus' parables teach some lesson about stewardship. The most famous might be the Parable of the Talents. Where I'm going to come out will surprise you so pay close attention.

As we always want to do, let's give the story some context. This parable comes in the middle of several others where the writer of Matthew has Jesus explaining how to be ready for his Second Coming. He warns listeners to stay alert and to be ready. He uses the example of an owner of a house who stayed awake to deter a thief. He tells a hypothetical story of a master who goes away and leaves a slave in charge. That slave has the choice to stay on task, and treat the other slaves well, or to get drunk, abuse the other slaves. One path leads to reward, to the place where there is wailing and gnashing of teeth. In yet another, 10 Bridesmaids are instructed to be ready by keeping their lamps trimmed and burning. **All of these illustrations appear in the context that would be coming again soon and will judge how you've done. Until then, be ready, alert and diligent.** {Now it's clear that Jesus didn't come again like Matthew thought}

THE PARABLE OF THE TALENTS, MATTHEW 25.14–30

'For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability.

Then he went away. The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money. After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. Then 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." His 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." And 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." His 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." Then 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; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours." But 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? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. For 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. As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

What do you think? Not a happy ending. Does it make perfect sense to you? If you've heard this before were there some things in there you didn't remember? Does it seem

4 fair to you? Is the parable about money, or something else? Is Jesus the Master who leaves town, only to return later? Which slave or slaves got it right? Which got it wrong?

A master leaves and gives three underlings new responsibility. BIG responsibility. 5 talents, 2 talents, and 1 talent. By way of background, a talent was worth about 20 years wages for an ordinary person—maybe a half a million dollars in today's money. A lot of money! 2.5 million, 1 million and half a million.

The one with 5 talents makes 5 more for the owner. The one with 2 makes 2 more. The one with one buries it in the ground to keep it safe. Master returns, is pleased with the 5 and the 2 but calls the last lazy and wicked.

What does this mean?! The way this text has been interpreted has some real problems:

Some have interpreted it as an argument for profit at any cost, endorsed right here in the Bible! By Jesus! Those who produce a literal financial profit are those whom God favors. To be responsible is to make money. Sprinkle in end-of-the-world over-spiritualization the reward that follows is the equivalent of a promotion to the corner office in the kingdom of God. Obviously, those poor dopes who aren't given money, or who can't turn a buck are wicked and lazy, and eventually cast into the abyss.

A slightly different spin on this used by some dishonest preachers is that if you give money to the church, you will get a personal return. Whatever money you have, give it to the Master and you will see personal profits come your way. To those of you who don't watch paid programming on Sunday mornings, Creflo Dollar is a televangelist. (Believe it or not, Creflo Dollar isn't his real name) Born Michael Smith, **(doesn't have quite the same ring, OR**

CHA-CHING to it) he drives a black Rolls Royce and flies private jets. He, and others like him, will tell you that if you send your money to them and their “ministry” God will bless you with literal financial gain.

Problem with both of these interpretations is that they just don’t pass the sniff test. Neither of these views fit the rest of Jesus’ teachings on money, greed and our relationship with God and one another. Remember all of that stuff about it being easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than a rich man enter the kingdom. *“If you wish to be complete, go and sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me.”* (Matthew 19:21) And last week’s scripture from Matthew 6.19–24: *“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth,...For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”*

Okay, okay, I picked on a couple of extreme interpretations. What about some others that we have more likely heard? The translation of the money units as “talents” has been very easily coopted to make this parable not about money at all. It’s about all of the personal abilities God has given us. Others have seen it as neither about money nor abilities, but about the word of God or the “good news” of the coming kingdom that must be shared and multiplied. **Okay, I don’t mind making that leap, and there is a beautiful message about giving your best to God, but it is about money in this parable.**

Another interpretation is that this is a warning against a play-it-safe life style. To follow Jesus demands sticking your neck out and taking some risk for the reign of God. This seems like the most plausible. This is congruent with the rest of Jesus’ teaching that there will be times when we have to take risk, and even that we will likely encounter hardships when we do.

6 But here's the problem: in each of these interpretations, Jesus is thought of as the "master" who is to return again. Here's the problem: *Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.*

A "harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, gathering where you did not scatter seed"? A harsh Jesus who steals product of another man's brow?! And it's not just the slave's accusation. The master agrees: *...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?"*

Not just an accusation now. It's an accusation and confession! This certainly isn't the Jesus portrayed in the rest of Matthew or the New Testament. What gives? I probably read the takes of 10 or 15 different Biblical scholars, and none of them could make the pieces of this parable puzzle fit.

Until I read what is called a Social-science Commentary. Fancy way to say, what was life like at the time? How would Jesus' listeners have heard his word? And it begins to open up. **Who were the bulk of Jesus' followers? Landless, peasant farmers.** People living hand to mouth, on the edge of starvation in many cases, with zero opportunity, one financial disaster, illness, or crop failure from literal slavery.

Along comes this parable about a wealthy master who gives millions to his servants. **How will they STEWARD his money?** The predominant economic theory of the time was that there was a fixed amount of money and goods in the world. It was like a pie. Some people had large slices of the pie and others very small slivers. If someone's piece of the pie grew bigger, it would be at the expense of someone else's.

I don't know if you're following where this is going, but what if we've been interpreting the heroes incorrectly? What if the heroes are not those who turned a profit, but that one who did not? How would Jesus' listeners have heard this parable about a rich man getting richer? In a world view where the economic pie is limited, where would they have assumed the money was being made. It probably would have just been one more example of the rich getting richer at the expense of the poor.

So let's turn the way we ask the question. Was the better steward the one who made more money for the master and assured himself a promotion at the expense of his fellow slaves? Or was the better steward the one who refused to profit at the expense of his sisters and brothers, to point that he was willing to suffer the consequences?

Like all good parables do, it forces us to think from many angles.

HOW DO WE THINK ABOUT STEWARDSHIP?

So how do we think about stewardship? How do we think about that which is in our control? We talked about money last week. How do we think about Stewardship with the understanding that if we make \$75,000 we are in the top .1% of the world's wealthiest people?

Sticking with money, how do we think about stewardship realizing that we are on the cusp of the greatest transfer of wealth in human history? Over the next 30 years, \$30–40 TRILLION will be passed from the Baby Boomer Generation. Due to the sheer size of the generation and the economic growth over this time period. How will people of faith steward that?

Last week I encouraged you to share your stories about giving and a number of you caught me after worship and

were in touch during the week. It was really inspiring to hear these stories.

I received an email just this week from a congregant who just unexpectedly inherited a nice sum of money. Her automatic thought was **not**, “Which investment strategy is best?” Her question was “How can I be responsible with this as a follower of Jesus?” That is a stewardship question.

But stewardship is more than money. It’s about time. It is about “talents” abilities. A lot of times we think about how we spend our money, but we don’t think about how we will spend our life.

As we think about stewardship, what is our approach to the building? We have a building that has been passed down to us from people who lived two generations ago. How will we chose to invest in it, or not invest in it. What is our stewardship responsibility to the next two generations? What is our responsibility to our global sisters and brothers? What is our responsibility to the congregation of the future so that they can fulfill their global responsibility in the future? Stewardship can be a complex blend of both short term and long term thinking.

ICING ON THE CAKE

If you’re still thinking about that parable with this new information given, I mentioned earlier that to really understand a piece of scripture we have to read before and after. What comes after this I’m sure you wondered. It’s commonly known as the last judgment. **All are gathered and Jesus is explaining who’s in and who’s out.**

Matthew 25.34b–36

“Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me

something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me."

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There was no accounting of talents accrued. No statement of creed or doctrinal checklist. Simply a question: How did those who cared for Jesus steward their money and their lives? How will we?

