

Sunday – November 13, 2011
Pastor – Rev. Walter W. Westbrook
Sermon – **Talents**

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Scripture: Matthew 25:14-30

Let's start by defining a talent. A talent, here and pretty much whenever the word pops up in the Bible, is an amount of money. In this case, a talent is the amount of money it would take a laborer 15 years to earn. So, the first slave received 75 years' wages and the second slave received just 30 years' wages. The third slave gets 15 years' wages, which is certainly more money than he had ever seen in one place.

Let's bring this up to date. If the laborer's wage then translates into minimum wage today, here's what we get. Minimum wage is \$7.25/hr. That would be, using a 40-hour week, \$15,080/year. So, the last slave was given \$226,200. The second slave was given \$452,400. The first slave was given \$1,131,000. The master is handing out almost \$2 million to his three slaves. Honestly, is that the sort of money you would have come up with? How much were you thinking one talent would be? A hundred dollars? A thousand?

So, the stakes in this story are very, very high - much higher than we'd have considered just a few minutes ago. Just think, we today are surprised at the money at play. Without having to do the math, Jesus' audience would also have been surprised, because none of them ever knew a master who would dole out that kind of money to his slaves and then leave town.

While the master is gone, the first slave turns his \$1.1 million into \$2.2 million. The second slave turns his \$452K into over \$900K. And the lazy slave simply buried his \$226K (which, now that you know how much it is, seems like it must have been quite a hole).

So, after a long time, the master returns. The first two slaves are thrilled to show him what they'd earned for him. But, it turns out the money isn't for the master at all. It is *their* money. They get to keep the money AND enter into the joy of their master.

But, the third slave is not thrilled at the master's return. He didn't like the master to begin with, and felt that anything he did to increase his master's ill-gotten gains would be wrong. So, he gave back the money he had been given to watch over. His disdain for his master drips from every word he says. But, what may be most surprising is, even after hearing the master give all the money back to the first two slaves, he says to the master, "Here you have what is yours." He still didn't realize that the master had given him the money for his own. He completely squandered the opportunities that kind of money provides. So, his money does not go back to the master, but goes to the first slave, raising his amount to almost \$2.5 million.

So, this parable is not about stewardship. The master "entrusted his property to them." But, ultimately, it was the property of the slaves, at least the first two slaves.

And, it's not about the rich getting richer while the poor lose everything. It's not about money at all. So, if it's not about vast amounts of money and what we do with it, what is it about?

This parable tells us nothing about the master, except he trusted an insane amount of money to his slaves, "each according to his ability." And it tells us nothing about how the slaves felt about the master in so many words. The first two slaves "went off at once" and doubled their money. The master doesn't tell them what he wants them to do with the money. They could have lived very nicely off the money for a long time, certainly better than most slaves lived. They could have been generous to their family and friends. They had enough money to live well, be generous, and

still have some to give back to the master when he returned.

But, what they did was work hard, starting right away, and doubled their money. Why? I think we can answer that when we contrast them with the third slave. He buried his money. He didn't waste it. He didn't gamble with it. He didn't throw wild parties with it. He buried it. He did not in any way benefit from that \$226K. He hid it where it was safe, and that was it.

We find out later that he really didn't think very highly of his master. His image of his master was a harsh man who took what wasn't his. He tells him, "I was afraid." The slave was afraid of his master, even when he was away, so he did what he thought was the safest thing with the money. His master told him he could have put it in a bank, which must have seemed safer then than it does now. But, there was *no* risk at all in what the slave did when he buried the money.

So, when we consider what the first two slaves did, compared with what the third slave did, we can see a contrast in attitude. Two want to please the master. The third just didn't want to make him mad. Let's put it this way, the first two loved the master and the third one didn't love him at all. He feared him, maybe even hated him.

But, we can see that the difference in the slaves' behavior is rooted in their *feelings* about the master. And, we can infer that those feelings were different because the *relationships* are different. The first two had a good relationship with the master. The third did not. He had a *perception* of the master that was different than the other two. His attitude towards the master was different. So, his relationship with the master was different, darker, grounded in fear and distrust.

So, this parable is about our perception, our attitude, our

relationship with God. People who see God as an angry God have no problem acting out their anger on others. Westboro Baptist Church of Topeka, KS, which sends its members to military funerals with signs that say, “God hates fags” serves an angry and twisted image of God.

It works the other way, too. If you like the idea of revenge, you’ll create in your mind a vengeful God.

Many Christians simply skip over whatever Jesus says about love and forgiveness and not judging, because they think God is small-minded like them. They want their God to support their need for revenge, their need to hold a grudge longer than a Sicilian elephant. They want their God to hate the people they hate and love the people they love, with updates as needed as to who is on which list (usually lengthening the hate list and shortening the love list).

But, the first two slaves served a master who turned out to be remarkably generous, rewarding them with all that money, and welcoming them into his joy. They got more than they ever would have imagined, because they lived in a way they thought would please the master, in spite of his complete lack of instructions.

The third slave probably wasn’t surprised to have the money taken from him. After all, as far as he was concerned it was still the master’s money. But, I’m guessing the outer darkness with wailing and gnashing of teeth may have been unexpected. Even so, it fit in with how he viewed his master. I’m sure there would have been room for redemption and forgiveness, but that would have been a much longer parable than Jesus wanted to tell.

So, let’s think about it now. Let’s think about the people who observe us, who know we call ourselves Christian and go to church. What sort of master are they seeing us serve? What sort of

God would they think we worship? How do we shape the perception of God in other people, without even being aware of it? Do we lead them to a generous and loving Lord? Or do we advertise a mean-spirited, greedy deity that's just waiting for people to mess up so he can burn them forever? I think we know where the God Hates Fags Church is leading people, and it's not to Jesus Christ as we understand him.

So, as I encourage us to trust in the generous love of the God Jesus wants us to know, I would also encourage us to think about the people who see us and who learn from us about the God we serve. Let's be the light of the world and the salt of the earth.

We are beggars, telling other beggars where to find the Bread of Life. Let's do it with enthusiasm and joy.