

## Reward

People read Jesus' parables in different ways. Some single out and identify every detail as a teaching point. Some draw them to a common focus of "preaching the gospel" or bringing people to salvation. Some discuss the possible omission of details that are lost



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or left incomplete in the writing down after the telling. We do well to remember that Jesus was often challenging teachings of a religion that had become focused on keeping the rules and rituals, often to the exclusion of love and compassion. Jesus continually taught and modeled God's grace in opposition to predominant societal and restrictive religion. His parable of the talents is about how you see God and how your understanding influences your values and actions.

Matthew 24:14-30 is recorded in the middle of three parables, preceded by the parable of the wise and foolish bridesmaids (v. 1-13) and followed by the parable of the sheep and goats (vv. 31-46) All these parables point to the truth that how you live in this world - your choices - will affect your life in the next world. The tone of these parables is sharp because Jesus wants us to understand God's love must be real in our present if it is to be known at the gates of heaven. Jesus was very clear that we must be good stewards of God's love, caring for the least of these, feeding and clothing the poor and outcasts, and visiting the prisoners. Examine all Jesus' parables and you cannot miss the idea that true faith defines whose we are.

The story begins with an image common to that day: a wealthy master and his three managers (stewards) in a world severely

divided between the haves and the have-nots. It is decision time, and each manager is given a wonderful opportunity. How do they see their challenge and how do they see their master? The choice is clear for all of them, but the outcome is found within their decisions. The silver given to the three managers is measured in talents, one talent equal to roughly 75 pounds of silver or the equivalent of labor over 16 years!

We usually interpret the figure of the master as Jesus in this parable, but that is inaccurate, because this is a story about the inequality of the world's values while pointing us to a very different life and spiritual values. Would Jesus celebrate avarice, equate money and profit with heaven's reward, or support the idea that God's plan is for the rich to prosper and the poor to get poorer? Treasure is the central focus, but not the kind you keep in the bank or invest in the stock market.

The third manager (slave) gets the most attention in our reading because of his unwise choice and the master's pronouncement that he is "wicked and lazy" ... "You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter" (v. 26). Some scholars see this portrayal as an accusation against the scribes and Pharisees who controlled the Temple and social structures; they were wealthy, but failed to recognize God as loving and gracious beyond their prosperous world. Jesus is confronting a religious system that serves the wealthy and powerful, while forgetting that God's chosen people were supposed to share God's love with a lost world.

Probably the saddest note in this parable is the third manager's justification for hiding his talent in the ground: "Master I knew that you were a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering

## Formations

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Scripture: Matthew 25:14-30

where you did not scatter, so, I was afraid" (vv. 24-25a). Images of God vary widely in our world: totally separated from our everyday world, a fearsome judge seated on a throne waiting to punish us, a nebulous force with no connection to humankind, a cultural imagination, a religious idea concocted by philosophers to establish moral law. Jesus is confronting the flawed religious thinking and culture of his day. This parable, like all his other teachings, offers a different perspective of a loving God who cares for each one of us our life now, as well as in eternity.

This parable causes me to think about how my living and language presents God to this world. What am I doing with the gifts God has entrusted to me? Am I offering people a better way to live than the ideas modeled by politicians, corporate industry or prosperity philosophies?

The third manager did nothing with his talent because he feared this overlord's selfishness. There are many intimidating forces in our world, but God's love and grace offer hope even in the shadows of this life. There are many organizations and programs today in which you can invest yourself and your resources: food pantries, homeless shelters, afterschool programs, tutoring, safe houses for battered women and children, addiction recovery programs, job training and placement, veteran's programs. We live in the now, until Christ comes and God brings the brokenness and imperfections of this world to a close. In the meantime, may we invest our lives in sharing the grace of God with this world. In sharing God's love we discover the greatest reward ... God's blessing.