

# Entrusted with God's Property

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**Ernest F. Krug, III**  
**Third Presbyterian Church**  
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**Matthew 25:14-30**

Perception is everything. One person looks at the world and sees abundance and experiences generosity; another sees scarcity and experiences anxiety: the same world, two different perceptions. The parable you just heard is about these two alternative perceptions. If you are a person who has saved money and worried about what risks to take in spending it, you can identify with the story. But the story line is very disturbing. You have two slaves given a very large sum of money by their master--in excess of \$1.5M in today's currency. They invest it, though where is not specified, and double the money. When the master returns from a long time away, he praises them as "trustworthy" and rewards them with a place in his family. The third slave is very cautious and anxious, and buries the money he receives in the ground. He is rebuked by the master for being "lazy" and is banished from his presence. This just doesn't seem right. It takes place in biblical times, of course, and it is part of a discourse by Jesus about the end times—the time when the Lord of heaven and earth will return to judge all people. But that makes it even more worrisome. This parable is saying that people will be judged not for what they believe but for what they have done with the assets they have. If you are the kind of person who avoids risky investments and values safety in determining what to do with money, this parable is probably very unsettling.

Does Jesus really want his disciples to feel judged for cautious behavior? It seems inconsistent with the Gospel message of forgiveness and mercy. It appears to contradict Jesus' claim that the first will be last and the last, first. Why is it that the cautious, risk-averse slave who buried his talent in the ground is severely punished by the master? Indeed, he is cast into outer darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth—a favorite expression of Matthew for those who are excluded from God's kingdom. Keep in mind that "talent" is used here to describe a sum of money, in ancient times equal to about 15 years' wages. It is not about how talented you are. That makes the parable even more problematic for me because the reward goes to those who invest the master's money successfully. Remember that nothing is said about **how** the first two slaves invest the money, only that they double it. To make matters worse the master states, "...to all those who have, more will be given...but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away." What!! Is Jesus reversing his position about God's favor towards the poor and vulnerable?

My research in various commentaries did not resolve this dilemma. Some believe that the master in the parable should not be equated with God, since the master is

described by the anxious slave as harsh and covetous. Others feel that the third slave misunderstood the character of the master. Notice that about half of the parable focuses on the third slave (vv. 24-30). Like Mark Douglas, a professor at Columbia Theological Seminary, I believe that the core message of this parable is about the third slave and his attitude toward and relationship with the master. It is a parable not so much about how to invest, as it is a parable about how not to live. Consider the fact that the master trusts the three slaves with his property and is very generous. It is only the third slave who perceives him to be harsh, and this perception results in his living out of fear of failure in his master's eyes and avoiding risk altogether. It is safest, he believes, just to bury the money in the ground.

Recently, in a meeting of the presbytery trustees, this parable came to mind as we debated whether to sell a church property or invest presbytery assets to renovate the building and equip it to do mission in the city. The trustees take seriously their fiduciary responsibility, and they struggle, appropriately, with decisions about the use of presbytery assets. There is also an aversion to having the presbytery own property. Property within a presbytery, it is generally felt, should be held by a church and cared for by a congregation. If a church can no longer maintain a property perhaps it is best to sell it and add the proceeds to the presbytery's Acquired Assets Fund. But what then? If this parable is about the proper use of personal or church or presbytery assets, what guidance does it give us? Perhaps a better question is: Where is Jesus in this picture?

Again, I think it best to focus on the third slave. He is called "worthless" in the translation I read from (NRSV), but the Greek text is more accurately translated "unprofitable" or "useless." It is not that he is a worthless human being; rather, he makes no commitment to use what he has been given. If this parable is about discipleship, and I believe it is, the unprofitable slave does nothing to live out his trust in the master. He seems to believe that the future is best controlled if he takes no risks. But Jesus wants disciples who are willing to take a risk in order to serve God faithfully. He wants disciples who perceive generosity and light in their lives. I believe that this kind of discipleship draws other people in, and assets are multiplied—true for people and true for the church.

It has nothing to do with how talented or wealthy you are, but everything to do with your passionate use of resources that God (the master) has placed at your disposal to build God's community, the body of Christ. People naturally want to be part of something that reflects trust and light in a dark world. The unprofitable slave lives in a dark world; he views the master in his life as harsh; he places the money he is given in a dark hole; he ends up in outer darkness with no hope. There is judgment, and discipleship is serious business. Where is Jesus? He is where light and faith act against the powers of darkness. He is with those courageous persons who dare to take risks to demonstrate God's loving presence in the world and who return to God more than they receive.

There is much to debate about this parable. But three key assertions can be drawn from it. First, *how we understand the nature of God affects how we use the assets we*

*have been given.* In my work as a developmental-behavioral pediatrician I would try to help children and their families understand that we all have assets and liabilities. There are ways to bypass liabilities and harness assets. If we focus on the liabilities in our lives—weaknesses, stresses, fears, and limitations—we will see the world as dark and foreboding. For those who believe in the God of history Jesus wants us to trust in a loving and generous God. Then, our perspective is open and hopeful, and we live with courageous faith in possibilities.

Second, Jesus wants his disciples to trust a future that is ultimately in God's hands. Though the master goes away for a long time, he does return, and there is an accounting of ones efforts. What we do, the decisions we make, matter. It is by grace that we are able to make and keep human life human, but we must be willing to take risks in faith that the God of history is acting through us. In other words, God relies on us to use the resources we have to be instruments of God's love in this world. That is the meaning of discipleship, and it does carry risks. When we give money to the church or spend time feeding hungry people or establish a tutoring or mentoring relationship with a child, we do not know whether the investment will multiply. But knowing that God is part of activities that love and serve others should reassure us that the investment is worth making.

Third, there is judgment for those who do nothing, who take no initiative, who take no risks with what God has entrusted to them. There is a message in this parable about responsibility. The assets we have are not our property. Our assets are God's property. If we bury them for protection, we come under judgment. Death eventually puts an end to the value of those assets for us. And so time is of the essence. We must consider carefully each day what discipleship requires of us. The unprofitable slave operated out of self-interest and safety. The result was forfeiture of the opportunity to enter into the joy of his master. If we believe that basking in the comfort of God's grace relieves us of responsibility for costly discipleship, our morning parable is best ignored. If not, it is a sobering reminder of God's expectations of those to whom God chooses to provide resources, whatever those might be, great or small.

The Presbytery voted yesterday to retain the Calvary St. Andrew church building and property, spend \$300,000.00 on needed renovation of the building, and approve a three-year trial for ROC SALT Mission. The purpose of the mission is to train and equip visiting church groups to do mission in the city. So, this center has a commitment from our presbytery. As a connectional church we now share in the commitment to make this mission work; some of our members are already involved. Such a venture carries risk of failure, but this morning's parable teaches that the master is angered not by those who take risks with his property but by those who take no risks out of fear.

As we enter this new week I challenge each of us to consider the nature of God revealed in Jesus Christ. Do you believe in a God who is generous and loving? If so, you will see generosity all around you. Do you believe that Jesus Christ brought light into a dark world? If so, you will see light breaking into the darkness around you. This will affect how you use what has been entrusted to you. I challenge us all to trust in God,

who owns your resources and the future into which you and I live. I believe that Jesus is admonishing us not to live in fear but in the hope and assurance that the God who loves us will not forsake us.

May God bless all our efforts to reach out courageously in Christ to those who need us, just as we need them, brothers and sisters in Christ. Amen.