

INVEST, INVEST, INVEST

Matthew 25:14-30

A sermon given by Dr. Larry R. Hayward on the Thirty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time, November 16, 2008, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia

Focus Text

'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.'

Tomorrow marks the one month anniversary of an article published in *The New York Times* by Warren Buffett, considered the most successful investor in American history. It is entitled "Buy American. I Am." Listen to some of its cogent passages:

THE financial world is a mess, both in the United States and abroad. Its problems, moreover, have been leaking into the general economy, and the leaks are now turning into a gusher. In the near term, unemployment will rise, business activity will falter and headlines will continue to be scary.

So ... I've been buying American stocks. ...

Why?

A simple rule dictates my buying: Be fearful when others are greedy, and be greedy when others are fearful. ...

Buffett continues:

...I can't predict the short-term movements of the stock market. I haven't the faintest idea as to whether stocks will be higher or lower a month — or a year — from now.

What is likely, however, is that the market will move higher, perhaps substantially so, well before either sentiment or the economy turns up. So if you wait for the robins, spring will be over....

...I'll follow the lead of a restaurant that opened in an empty bank building and then advertised: "Put your *mouth* where your money *was*."

Today my money and my mouth both say equities.¹

¹ Warren E. Buffett, "Buy American. I Am," *The New York Times* 10/17/08.

The day Buffett published his comments, the Dow fell 127 points. Friday, it closed 350 points lower than that. The fear he acknowledges remains in place; so too, does his advice: Invest, invest, invest.

“Buy American. I am.”

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In an entirely different but not unrelated sphere, the parable Jesus tells about three slaves being given unequal talent by their mysterious, disappearing, then re-appearing owner is a similar call in matters of faith and life to Warren Buffett’s call in matters of investment.

In the parable, three slaves are given, respectively, five talents, two talents, and one talent.

One talent represents fifteen years worth of labor;² so at, say, \$40,000 a year, about half the median income of our area, the amounts are, respectively \$3,000,000, \$1,200,000, and \$600,000. No dispenser of small change this slaveowner.

Having dispensed his goodies, the owner goes away on a journey of unspecified length and unknown destination.

- The five- and two-talent slaves immediately trade their talents in the marketplace.
- The one-talent slave digs a hole and buries the owner’s money.

After some length of time, unspecified but characterized as “long,” the owner returns and settles accounts with his three slaves.

The first two are treated equally:

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.

The third slave – the one-talent grave digger – is treated differently:

You wicked and lazy slave! [the owner says]. 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.

Then the owner turns and speaks to unspecified servants: “...take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents.”

Then to all present the slaveowner says:

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.³

With these words, Matthew’s presentation of the parable ends. The slave who started with one talent has nothing to show for his fear, his worry, his caution, his prudence.

“Buy American,” says Buffett. “I am.”

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² M. Eugene Boring, “The Gospel of Matthew: Introduction, commentary, and Reflections,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible: Volume VIII* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 453.

³ Since both of these phrases occur elsewhere in Matthew, it is possible they are additions to the parable by Matthew rather than by Jesus.

When Jesus tells this parable, he says it describes the kingdom of God. From this I believe we can deduce that Jesus is describing “the way life *is* and *will be* in the power and realm of God.”

The parable is stunning. It is troubling. It is theologically challenging to say the least.

Its protagonist, or main character, is “the one talent-slave,”

- who is given less to start with
- who rightly perceives the owner to be harsh
- who therefore legitimately fears the owner
- and who is led by his fear to be prudent – not to lose what the owner has given him to manage.

Most commentators see that in this parable, while talent originally refers to money, it comes to represent the larger and more common meaning we have given it – ability.⁴ Commentators also caution that in this parable that the owner does not represent God; nor the “outer darkness,” some form of eternal damnation, but rather, isolation from the human community.⁵

But even with these caveats, we can hardly blame the instincts of this slave.

As Presbyterians known for our fiscal conservatism, living in a city of Scottish Presbyterian ancestry, we identify with the one

- who seeks first and foremost to preserve that with which he has been entrusted
- who takes no risks
- who is cautious in the face of uncertainty
- and above all who seeks not to lose what he has received.

Many of us in this room have met this slave and he is us.

Yet in the parable, he loses what he has been given, in terms of

- the actual talent
- the trust and praise of the master
- and the opportunity to remain part of the active, living, thinking, imagining human community, the community that exists this side of “the outer darkness.”

It is clear that the one-talent slave is worse off having received and lost talent than had he never received talent in the first place.

“Buy American,” says Buffett. “I am.”

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So if this parable is primarily about the one-talent slave, and if Jesus intends us to identify with him, what is Jesus teaching us through such identification? What are we to take from this parable?

Four brief truths.

First, the distribution of talent is unequal.

Some of us indeed do receive – through accident of birth, genes, or environment – five talents, while some receive only one. We may indeed be created equal, but we are not equally endowed. The distribution of talent is tragically unequal.

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But second, the distribution of talent ranges from sufficient to lavish.

⁴ Boring 453.

⁵ George A. Buttrick, *The Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1928), 249.

The smallest portion is one talent – over half a million dollars.

Across the river works a school superintendent, becoming nationally-known, whose mantra is “every child can learn.” No matter where they are born, Michelle Rhee says. No matter what their home life is. No matter how many books are in the family living room. “Every child *can* learn,” she argues.

Time will tell how accurate her mantra is in the rough and tumble of urban education.

But if *she* sees in each child an ability to learn something, this *parable* sees in each human being some talent that can be invested in some way.⁶

And the parable tells us that it is worth our investing in every child so that every child can invest in us.

All of us have something that can be developed and increased. The distribution of talent ranges from sufficient to lavish.

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Third, we end out worse off if we simply seek to stay where we are with our talent.

- We cannot give the talent back, because the master has gone away on a journey.
- We can try to keep it in the exact condition in which we received it, but, according to the parable, we will lose our talent if we do not use our talent.
- Our talent will be taken from us and given to someone who will use it.

Our only choice is to go forward with our talent, or backward. We cannot remain the same.

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Fourth, then, and final: what is important in this kingdom called God’s is this: We don’t start with equal talent and we don’t end with equal talent, but *everyone who invests his or her talent – everyone who puts their talent to use – sees it grow.* Our talent, when used, multiplies beyond expectation and never stops growing.

- Legend has it that Colonel Sanders started Kentucky Fried Chicken with his first Social Security check
- At age 93, Czeslaw Milosz published his thirty-first book of poetry, one of which begins:
Not soon, as late as the approach of my ninetieth year,
I felt a door opening in me and I entered
the clarity of early morning.⁷
- Until last week, it looked as if Penn State football coach Joe Paterno might lead his team toward a national title – in his 82nd year.

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The great American preacher, George Buttrick, pointed to Shakespeare to summarize this parable:

Heaven does with us as we with torches do;
Not light them for ourselves: for if our virtues
Did not go forth of us, ’twere all alike
As if we had them not. Spirits are not finely touched
But to fine issues.⁸

“Buy American,” says Buffett. “I am.”

Invest, invest, invest.

Amen.

⁶ See Evan Thomas, Eve Conant, and Pat Wingert, “An Unlikely Gambler,” *Newsweek* 8/23/08.

⁷ Czelaw Milosz, “Late Ripeness,” in *Second Space: New Poems*, translated by the author and Robert Hass (New York: Ecco Press, HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 2004).

⁸ Quoted from *Measure to Measure* in Buttrick, 249.