

# *Just Do It!*

March 2, 2003  
Sermon Background Study

Scripture Passage – Matthew 25:14-30 (from the NRSV)

“For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them;<sup>15</sup> to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away.<sup>16</sup> The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents.<sup>17</sup> In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents.<sup>18</sup> But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master’s money.<sup>19</sup> After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them.<sup>20</sup> 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.’<sup>21</sup> 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.’<sup>22</sup> 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.’<sup>23</sup> 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.’<sup>24</sup> 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;<sup>25</sup> so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.’<sup>26</sup> 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?’<sup>27</sup> 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.<sup>28</sup> So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents.<sup>29</sup> 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.<sup>30</sup> As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’”

*Context matters!*

Understanding the Bible can be tricky. The truth is that there are better and poorer ways of interpreting scripture – all interpretations are *not* equally valid. One of the ways we can help guard against poor interpretation is to read any passage in context. Today’s parable is taken from a lengthy section of Jesus’ teachings in Matthew’s gospel. Understanding this parable and reading it responsibly is easier if we look first at the entire block of teachings in which this parable is found.

Matthew’s gospel includes five sizeable sections of Jesus’ teachings. We know the first section, spanning chapters 5-7, as the Sermon on the Mount. Today’s parable is from the fifth block of Jesus’ teaching, spanning chapters 23-25. These teachings come after Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem, his entrance into Jerusalem (Palm Sunday), and his confrontation with the Jewish leadership at the temple. Jesus had interrupted the sacrificial work at the temple, decrying the temple as a “den of thieves,” invoking the words and actions of the prophet Jeremiah. Now, beginning in chapter 23, Jesus warns of the consequences to the leaders, to the temple, and to all Jerusalem if they do not embrace Jesus as the rightful king and his way of being God’s people.

### Talents?

I considered using Dr. Peterson’s paraphrase for this parable as we did for the others in this series. However, we are using the NRSV translation today because it retains the word *talent* to describe the wealth entrusted to each servant.

A *talent* is an ancient measure of monetary wealth and represented an enormous sum. It would take the average laborer 15-20 years to earn a single talent! The master entrusted something of almost unimaginable value to the servants, even to the servant who received only a single talent.

“Talent” is used in this parable to refer to money. Nonetheless, because of the popularity of this parable, the word “talent” came to be used in English to mean our God-given abilities. Though the master entrusted money to each servant, Christians have long understood that God entrusts us all with “talents” that we are to use to further the master’s work.

Most often, Jesus told parables to explain his own actions. Jesus told of a doctor going to the sick, not the healthy, to explain why he associated with the despised tax-collectors. He told stories about lost coins, lost sheep, and a lost son to explain to the Pharisees why he ate with sinners. Jesus told a story about some wicked tenants to explain his own actions in the temple. Today's parable is one of several in chapters 24 & 25. Jesus tells a story about servants who aren't prepared for their master's arrival and another about a group of bridesmaids, only some of whom stay prepared for the arrival of the bridegroom. The parable of the talents ends with a servant who did not put to work what had been entrusted to him by his master. Jesus' listeners would have undoubtedly wondered if they were prepared for God's arrival at the long-awaited inauguration of his kingdom. Had they put to work for God what had been entrusted to them?

Matthew wrote his gospel perhaps forty years after Jesus' death and resurrection. He wrote it for a community that waited, perhaps impatiently, for the second coming of Jesus, the *parousia*. In Jesus' words, they would have heard a challenge of their own. Were they prepared for Jesus' coming? How had they used their time and talents during Jesus' absence? Certainly, some of them had friends and family who had died when the Romans crushed Jerusalem only a few years before. They knew first-hand that Jesus' warnings had gone unheeded. Too many Jews had stayed committed to violent rebellion as the way to bring about God's kingdom and return YHWH to Zion. Just as Jesus challenged his original listeners to turn to the way of peace and love and faithfulness, so his words challenged Matthew and his community to be true and diligent disciples, not only staying prepared for Jesus' return but doing all they could every day and in every way to make God's kingdom a present reality. Jesus' words confront us with the same challenge.

### High Expectations

Today's parable is straightforward on the surface. The master gives varying (and vast!) sums of money to three servants. Each servant receives a sum corresponding to his abilities. The first two servants put the money to work, doubling what had been entrusted to them. But the third servant, seemingly fearful of the master, buries the money and adds nothing to what has been entrusted to him. When the master

#### What's a disciple?

Though the word "disciple" doesn't appear in this parable, the nature of true discipleship is Jesus' subject. The word "disciple" appears some 250 times in the Gospels and Acts and translates the Greek word, *mathetes*. In Jesus' world, this was a word that was used to describe something deeper than simply a pupil. It was used to describe the relationship of an apprentice to a master weaver or a student physician to a doctor. Socrates and Plato used the word to describe the ideal fellowship between the master and the disciple – those who give and those who receive. Thus, Christians used the word to describe their own relationship with Jesus, a personal commitment encompassing love, learning, and obedience. In Luke's Gospel, the fellowship of master and disciples is broken at Gethsemane and Luke stops using the word "disciple." He begins to use it again only for the wider community in the Book of Acts after Pentecost.

returns home, he is pleased with the first two servants.

Evidently, they had done as the master had expected them to do. But the master has only harsh words for the third servant, calling him "wicked and lazy;" he had accomplished nothing for the master and is tossed out of the household.

This is a parable about discipleship and God's expectations of us all. The first two servants use well what they've been given, working faithfully in the master's service. Upon the master's return they are invited to share in the master's joy. However, the third servant is not faithful. He shows no love for his master, but instead sees him as some sort of "sharp dealer" who is to be feared. As D. A. Hagner puts it in his commentary, "The point cannot be missed: before the Son of Man [Jesus] comes and until that time whenever it may be, disciples are called to faithful and steady service of the kingdom."<sup>1</sup>

We know that we are a richly blessed congregation . . . and I'm not talking about money here. Look around the sanctuary on a Sunday morning. Our congregation is filled to overflowing with talented and energetic people of enormous abilities. This parable challenges us all to ask ourselves whether we are truly putting all our talents and abilities to work in the furtherance of God's kingdom. We should do no less in response to God's love for us.

<sup>1</sup> from D.A. Hagner's commentary on Matthew in the *Word Biblical Commentary*. John Knox Press. 1993.

## Daily Bible Readings – Jesus’ Judgment Discourse in Matthew’s Gospel

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p><b>Day 1 Matthew 23 Jesus teaches on judgment in the present.</b></p>	<p><b>Day 2 Matthew 24:1-31 Jesus speaks of the end-times and his second coming</b></p>
<p><b>Day 3 Matthew 24:32-51 Parables and warnings</b></p>	<p><b>Day 4 Matthew 25:1-30 The Ten Bridesmaids and the Parable of the Talents</b></p>
<p><b>Day 5 Matthew 25:31-36 The Last Judgment</b></p>	<p><b>Weekly Prayer Concerns</b></p>

## Sermon Notes

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### Spring Bible Academy Session begins the week of March 24!

We'll be offering a variety of daytime and evening classes. Information on all the classes will be coming in your newsletter. You can also learn more and register at [www.standrewumc.org](http://www.standrewumc.org). Here is some info on a couple of the classes. Rev. Doug Meyer, Rev. Kathryn MaGee, and Monty Moore are going to teach a class on Thursday mornings based on Brennan Manning's book, *Ruthless Trust*, looking at our need for uncompromising trust in God's love for us. Also on Thursday mornings, Frankey Commer is going to lead a class on the Gospel of Mark. Mark was the first gospel written and is a great starting place to learn about the life of Jesus. We hope you'll join us for one of our spring classes!

### Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. We are all comfortable with the idea that there are expectations of us at work or at home, but many of us get really uncomfortable with the idea that God has expectations of us as well. Do you agree? If so, why do you think people don't want to hear about God's expectations of us? What are God's expectations of us? In Matthew's Gospel, immediately after the Parable of the Talents, Jesus tells the Parable of the Sheep and Goats (Matthew 25:31-46). In this parable, the blessed are those who feed the hungry, clothe the unclothed, care for the sick, etc. In our busy lives, how much time do we make for doing the work of Jesus' disciples? Should we make more time? How?
2. At the end of today's parable, Jesus says that the unfaithful servant is tossed "into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." These are Matthew's favorite metaphors for the fate of the wicked and stand in sharp contrast to the blessings given the first two servants. If talk of "God's expectations" makes Christians uncomfortable, Jesus talking about condemnation and judgment really gets us squirming. Somehow, it can seem sort of Old Testament, not New Testament! Yet, the entirety of chapters 23-25 of Matthew is commonly referred to as Jesus' "judgment discourse." Why does Jesus talking about judgment make so many of us uncomfortable? Typically, these chapters are seen as pastoral, encouraging early Christians to be true disciples, doing God's work. How could we think of judgment as something loving that encourages us? What *does* encourage you to be a true disciple?