

“Save All You Can”

A sermon preached by

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Matthew 25:14-30 - Common English Bible (CEB)

“The kingdom of heaven is like a man who was leaving on a trip. He called his servants and handed his possessions over to them. To one he gave five valuable coins,[a] and to another he gave two, and to another he gave one. He gave to each servant according to that servant’s ability. Then he left on his journey.

“After the man left, the servant who had five valuable coins took them and went to work doing business with them. He gained five more. In the same way, the one who had two valuable coins gained two more. But the servant who had received the one valuable coin dug a hole in the ground and buried his master’s money.

“Now after a long time the master of those servants returned and settled accounts with them. The one who had received five valuable coins came forward with five additional coins. He said, ‘Master, you gave me five valuable coins. Look, I’ve gained five more.’

“His master replied, ‘Excellent! You are a good and faithful servant! You’ve been faithful over a little. I’ll put you in charge of much. Come, celebrate with me.’

The second servant also came forward and said, ‘Master, you gave me two valuable coins. Look, I’ve gained two more.’

“His master replied, ‘Well done! You are a good and faithful servant. You’ve been faithful over a little. I’ll put you in charge of much. Come, celebrate with me.’

“Now the one who had received one valuable coin came and said, ‘Master, I knew that you are a hard man. You harvest grain where you haven’t sown. You gather crops where you haven’t spread seed. So I was afraid. And I hid my valuable coin in the ground. Here, you have what’s yours.’

“His master replied, ‘You evil and lazy servant! You knew that I harvest grain where I haven’t sown and that I gather crops where I haven’t spread seed? In that case, you should have turned my money over to the bankers so that when I returned, you could give me what belonged to me with interest. Therefore, take from him the valuable coin and give it to the one who has ten coins. Those who have much will receive more, and they will have more than they need. But as for those who don’t have much, even the little bit they have will be taken away from them. Now take the worthless servant and throw him outside into the darkness.’

“People there will be weeping and grinding their teeth.

In his sermon on *The Use of Money*, John Wesley offers some obvious advice to his followers. In essence he says, the first way that you can save all you can is to stop spending your money on frivolous things. But what qualifies as frivolous will always be a matter of discussion. As a registered foodie he gets me where I live when he writes, “there is a regular, reputable kind of sensuality, an elegant epicurism, which does not immediately disorder the stomach, nor (sensibly, at least) impair the understanding. And yet (to mention no other effects of it now) it cannot be maintained without considerable expense. Cut off all this expense! Despise delicacy and variety, and be content with what plain nature requires.” So much for the Osso Buco that I had the other night! He then goes on to take aim at a list of other extravagances: “superfluous or expensive apparel, or by needless ornaments. Waste no part of it in curiously adorning your houses; in superfluous or expensive furniture; in costly pictures, painting, gilding, books; in elegant rather than useful gardens.”

Just as beauty is in the eye of the beholder, so too what is necessary versus what is frivolous in our lives can be a matter of opinion. Each of us makes decisions about our use of money that could easily be challenged by someone else. What we drive, what we wear, where we live, and the scores of financial decisions that we make on a weekly basis are all an expression of what we value in our lives. Our bank accounts and credit card invoices are moral and ethical statements about what we value and where we believe God is inviting us to participate in the realm of God’s dream for us and the world.

Interestingly, Bill and Melinda Gates, Warren Buffet, and Sting have all followed Wesley’s lead when they publicized that they wouldn’t be giving their children the bulk of their enormous wealth. Wesley himself wasn’t enormously wealthy but he did suggest that "if all your children were equally ignorant of the true use of money?" “I ought then ... to give each what would keep him above want, and to bestow all the rest in such a manner as I judged would be most for the glory of God.”

The enormity of the wealth that has been obtained by the Gates and the Buffets of the world is really beyond comprehension, but their Giving Pledge Campaign to encourage the uber wealthy people of the world to contribute their wealth to philanthropy on or before their deaths is a testament to the power of earning, saving, and giving. And sometimes it takes these astronomical figures to get our attention and focus our behaviors on what it might mean in our lives.

In Matthew's parable of the talents or valuable coins, the author takes this story from the Jesus tradition and uses an enormous sum of money to make his point. A talent in Jesus' time was the largest "denomination" that was known in the Roman world. It was probably equal to 6000 denari, or the equivalent of over 15 years of wages. So even the steward that was given one talent had been entrusted with a very large sum of money.

If you have been around the church very much at all, chances are you have heard this story several times and you probably think you know where a preacher might go in talking about it. But one scholar calls this story the most misinterpreted and misunderstood parable in the New Testament.¹

There are two diametrically opposed possible interpretations for how this parable disrupts business as usual. William Herzog and others argue that the "one talent man" is the hero of the parable. He alone of the three refuses to increase his funds in the only way a retainer in a wealthy household could in those days, by extracting funds from those who were already strapped beyond endurance by both Temple and Roman taxes. The one talent man, by burying his talent, refused to participate in this oppression.²

But there is a second, more frequent, interpretation that better fits the context in which Matthew has placed the parable, with its warning against passivity. It also makes more sense in light of the fact that the one talent man acknowledges that his motivation was fear and timidity.

In this reading, what is strange about the parable is the harsh treatment of the third servant. Rabbinic law stipulated that burying was the best safeguard against theft and that when one buries entrusted money, one is free from liability for it. The one talent man has been prudent and he proudly presents his one talent to the returning master.³

So the parable still disrupts business as usual, but it does so by recommending risk rather than caution. According to this reading of the parable, we are to take what abilities and powers we have been given and use them to increase the influence of God's kingdom on earth. God's power is different from that of a wealthy aristocrat. The parable of the judgment that follows the parable of the talents makes this clear. We further God's purposes not by being an agent of those

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² William R. Herzog, *Parables as Subversive Speech*, Westminster John Knox Press, 1994

³ Madeline Boucher, *The Parables*, Michael Glazier, 1981, p.139

who have more in exploiting those who have less. On the contrary, we follow Jesus when we risk pouring out our abilities and influence toward a new realm.

So often we choose the timid path, the safe way, and perhaps this story is encouraging us to step out in faith with a dramatic risk in our lives. Recently I read a story about Dorothy Ebersbach, who died a few years ago at age 96. Dot, as she was called, was one of a small number of women who was accepted into the Women's Airforce Service Pilots during World War II. She served as a test pilot who also helped ferry planes from one strategic location to another, and frequently towed targets for the male pilots to shoot at during gunnery practice. ...talk about a risk taker! After the war she became a nurse and worked in the public schools in Tampa, Florida. Just before and then after her death she gave nearly five million dollars to Case Western Reserve University to help them establish a flight nursing program. And she also endowed two scholarships and funded other gifts at her local United Methodist church in Tampa.

Dorothy's story is replicated over and over in the lives of Jesus' disciples. By saving all they can, they set priorities about their spending and eventually their giving. Sometimes it involves dealing with our fears and taking the risk to do what we know God is calling us to do and be.

Next week I'll be talking more about that giving side as we bring our pledges for the 2017 operating campaign to worship. If you aren't able to be here next week, I encourage you to give us your pledge today in the offering plate as it is passed. And I encourage you to pray about your own giving as a risk taking endeavor to help this congregation to be the fearless presence of Christ in the world.

Grace and peace, AMEN.