

[Jesus said to the disciples:] ¹⁴“For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; ¹⁵to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. ¹⁶The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. ¹⁷In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. ¹⁸But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master’s money.

¹⁹After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. ²⁰Then 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.’ ²¹His 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.’ ²²And 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.’ ²³His 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.’

²⁴Then 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; ²⁵so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.’ ²⁶But 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? ²⁷Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. ²⁸So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. ²⁹For 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.³⁰As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’”

I admit from the get-go that today’s parable would be easier to swallow if it only told us about the slaves who received five and two talents. The slave who received one talent... that part sounds so... harsh, which leads us to ask, “Is harshness a characteristic of the God we worship?” To be honest, every time I hear this parable, my mind focuses on the judgment at the end, as if that were the parable’s only takeaway, and not one of good news, either. But like last week’s parable of the ten bridesmaids, there has to be some good news here. So let’s try to have a fresh look at this parable today.

A key detail we often overlook is the abundance of the master’s gifts. A talent was a unit of measure for weight. It was right around 80 lbs., and when used to measure money, the weight was applied to silver. So one talent was worth about 80 lbs. of silver. In the scenario of the parable, a talent would be the equivalent of 16 years of a slave’s work. Sixteen years of labor for one talent.

Let’s be clear that slavery in biblical times was not like chattel slavery. The chattel slavery that was employed in America was something you were born into with no hope of ever being free. In biblical times, slavery was different. Someone would enter into bonded servitude in order to pay off a debt. The debt repayment was intended to be accomplished prior to the debtor’s death, and -- although this servitude was no paradise -- there were strict limits on what the master was allowed to do to the debtor. Notice what is happening in this parable. The master is going away for a long time, and that master is entrusting to his slaves the equivalent money of 16 years of labor, 32 years of labor, and 80 years of labor. That easily could be more than they owed in the first place. Attempts to figure out why the different slaves received different amounts are always based on speculation. So don’t let that detail distract you from the generous nature of each of these gifts. Because no master would do what this master does. No master says, “You owe me out the wazoo. Now I’m going away for a while, and in the meantime I’m going to give you this exorbitant sum of money. When I return,

I want to see what you've done with it." When someone owes you so much that they are bound to you as a slave, you don't hand them a large sum of money, turn around and say, "I'm out of here!"

On a monetary basis, what the master offers is an extraordinarily abundant gift. But notice another aspect of the master's generosity: the abundance of the gift of time. We don't know how long it was, just that Jesus says it was a long time. We are accustomed to immediate satisfaction and tend to dismiss any virtues that might come from waiting, so it can be easy to overlook the gift of allowing the slaves to live in this extraordinary abundance for "a long time." Because that time gives them the opportunity to make something of the monetary gift. That is where our attention should be placed. We should be focusing on the abundant gifts at the start of the parable. Why? Because that is where we are in our lives. We are in the time of waiting for Christ's return.

Like last week's parable about the ten bridesmaids, this week's parable also shines a light on grace and judgment in the Christian life, here and now, on this side of Christ's return. The bridesmaids parable reveals how we are supposed to find the presence of Christ in human suffering and poverty. Today's parable reveals how the superabundant gifts of grace and joy are made available to us even on this side of Christ's return.

When the master does return in the parable, he says to the two slaves that they will continue to enjoy those same gifts, but this time with the added assurance of the master's presence. "Enter into the joy of your master," he tells the first two slaves. The truth, though, is that you and I are supposed to hear that command in the here and now, not just upon Christ's return. "Enter into the joy of your master" is an invitation to understand the presence of Christ with us now. Like the bridesmaids' parable reveals, Christ is present in our poverty and suffering. Like the holy meal reveals, Christ is present in the breaking of bread and drinking of wine. Like the Holy Spirit reveals, Christ is present when we as a faith community care for one another and lean on one another. In all of those examples, God meets us with the abundant gifts of grace, community, forgiveness, and mercy. The gifts are not flashy, but they are abundant. When lives are anchored in these gifts, the result is lives that are -- however imperfectly -- characterized by their appreciation, contentment, and joy. "Enter into the joy of your master." That is an invitation for our lives now just as much as it is an invitation upon Christ's return.

Since this parable of the talents is supposed to shape how we understand our time of waiting, then what do we make of the slave who hid the talent in a hole? To be honest, I think it is kind of simple. It is merely a warning, even though it is delivered with a heavy dose of hyperbole, which was a common trait in parables. The warning comes down to this: Don't be a person of faith who is cantankerous. A person who sours everything for others. A person who is never content or satisfied, and who lets God and everyone else know it. I get it: life will still be tough, even for people of faith. In one form or another and to different degrees, we will experience poverty and suffering in our lives. Yet, like the wise bridesmaids, we are called to recognize the presence of Christ in poverty and suffering. Life will still be tough; there will still be pandemics, disasters, broken hearts, and utter disappointments. While fully claiming the reality of such things, faith can still teach us to be appreciative of God's presence in our lives, to be content when we and our neighbors receive our daily bread, and to have a blessed joy that is able to carry us through the worst parts of life. We should not allow the bad things that take place between now and Christ's return to overshadow the gifts of joy, contentment, and appreciation that faith offers. With that in mind, the judgment of the third slave comes into better light. It is a warning against being a person of faith who is characteristically miserable.

The parable of the talents serves as an invitation into the abundant gifts of God's grace and joy. Those are the gifts. They might be packaged humbly inside of faith. These gifts might not appear to be grandiose. But these gifts are abundant. There is grace, there is community, there is forgiveness, there is contentment. More than enough for us. That is what Christ offers in this walk of faith.

Come. Enter into the joy of your master.