



## Life on Loan

Psalm 90:1-8,12 & Matthew 25:14-30

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We've heard this parable before. It is not Jesus' answer to a financial plan or a 401k, but too many folks think that it is or something akin to that. We become distracted by the mention of the money in this parable. The talent that Jesus speaks of here is also not what we mean by talent, like an ability to play the flute. Talent in this case is a sum of money totaling about fifteen years of salary. We get distracted by this talk of money, but money is not really at the heart of what Jesus is making here.

The apostle Paul, I think, understood what was at the heart of this parable pretty well for he wrote this to the church in Rome:

**If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not hesitate to spare his own Son but gave him up for us all--can we not trust such a God to give us, with him, everything else that we can need?**

I hope that you see the connection. Maybe by the end of this sermon I will have convinced you of this connection that Paul has delivered in this the right interpretation.

Ultimately this parable is about trust. Do we trust the One who has given us life? Or do we dread God and fear the Giver of life? Think about that in terms of the parable and the third servant.

We get distracted by the end of the parable regarding the slothful servant who loses his one talent to his more productive five-talent companion. Yet this is not the point of the parable. The point is what the slothful or third servant did with his one talent – what he did with the gift or loan of his life. And what did he do? He buried it and he hid it for fear of the master. He said that he knew what kind of man his master was – that the master was a cheater and untrustworthy for he reaped where he had not sowed and gathered where he had not scattered. This servant misjudged his master and it made all the difference in the world.

Because he feared his master so greatly, he buried his talent. And if I am correct in assuming that this parable has something to do with how we are called to live our lives, we see the great shame of that fellow – the great disrespect that he showed to his master for not having really used the gift that he had been given.

The great twentieth-century theologian, Karl Barth remarked as much in his massive *Church Dogmatics*:

**Unlike the life of God, [human life] is neither free nor external. It can be lived only because and as the life of God stands behind it as the true life, the basis and source of life, in which actuality and continuity, constancy and variability, eternity and time are one. Hence it can only be lived and not held fast or possessed. It can only become constantly real in virtue of the free action of the life-giving divine Spirit. It is life as a loan.**

Barth says that life “can only be lived and not held fast or possessed.” Jesus intimates that the servant who buried his portion of the master's property had not done justice to the master's entrusting him with it. In short, we must actually live the life that God has given us on loan. We cannot protect it fully or possess it completely; we can and must actually just live it – we cannot bury it.

In a bit of a longer quote, John Buchanan, former pastor of Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago adds this:

**The point here is not really about doubling your money and accumulating wealth. It is about living. It is about investing. It is about taking risks. It is about Jesus himself and what he has done and what is about to happen to him. Mostly it is about what he hopes and expects of [his followers] after he is gone. It is about being a follower of Jesus and what it means to be faithful to him, and so, finally, it is about you and me. ...**

**The greatest risk of all, it turns out, is not to risk anything, not to care deeply and profoundly enough about anything to invest deeply, to give your heart away and in the process risk everything. The greatest risk of all, it turns out, is to play it safe, to live cautiously and prudently. Orthodox, conventional theology identifies sin as pride and egotism. However, there is an entire other lens through which to view the human condition. It is called sloth, one of the ancient church's seven deadly sins. Sloth means not caring, not loving, not rejoicing, not living up to the full potential of our humanity, playing it safe, investing nothing, being cautious and prudent, digging a hole and burying the money in the ground.**

Now that is the greatest sin for any of us who claim to be followers of the One who risked everything for the sake of humankind ... not doing anything ... not risking anything, but rather being smug and content in our own righteousness and faithfulness or in the mistaken understanding that we are the captains of our destiny or soul. No, as followers of Jesus Christ, we must reject the example of the third servant in his parable. We cannot be the ones who dig a hole in our lives and bury what God has given us.

The third servant took no joy in this life. He took no joy in this interchange, or the opportunity afforded him. In fact, he was the one who thrust back the gift of the talent and said: "Take it! I don't want the responsibility for it! Here, take what is yours, you got back what you gave me!" He found only dread in his dealings with his master and only paralyzing fear over the weight of what he had been given. He found no joy in what he had been given.

The question then comes to us, from this parable: "Does God's gift of life, this loan from God, give you joy or dread?" Are you sensitive enough to the gift of life to find just the sheer joy of being the recipient of such a wondrous gift? Is not life then, with this understanding from the parable, meant to be lived with joyful anticipation and hope?

Karl Barth, a little later in his *Church Dogmatics* says:

**To be joyful means to look out for opportunities for gratitude. ... AND ... Joy is the simplest form of gratitude.**

Having joy in this life that we have been given – real, authentic joy, not something that we manufacture or try to build for ourselves, but real joy is the response that Jesus is looking for in this Parable of the Talents.

This is something especially to be mindful of as we approach Thanksgiving, for so many of us will busy ourselves attempting to manufacture joy. You know what I mean. We'll try to put together the most perfect family gathering all the while knowing that someone will mess it all up by the end of the weekend – probably or maybe we ourselves!

But in that moment right as people are coming and gathering and we're helping them with their coats and their casseroles and we're anticipating just which one of these so-and-sos is going to wreck our perfect Thanksgiving – there is a fleeting, spectacular moment of joy. It is a moment of incredible joy, real joy, a thanksgiving for life and for the God who provides this life. In that moment, we don't bury or hide that, we rejoice and celebrate – we open our arms and hug them all, even the one who we are convinced is going to make the big stink this year! We know that in that moment is life ... real life in God.

Paul was so convinced of this that he wrote:

**If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not hesitate to spare his own Son but gave him up for us all--can we not trust such a God to give us, with him, everything else that we can need?**

Indeed, this is the lesson of the Parable of the Talents: We can trust this God, this Giver of life, and then, buoyed by this confidence not in ourselves as the captain of our souls, but in the One who has given life, we can fully rejoice ... we can really live. We can live in that joy, for it is not one that we have made ourselves, it is a joy in life that God has simply given.