

The Parable of the Talents, or The Moral Consequences of Economic Growth

Sara Haefeli, October 30, 2016, Forest Home Chapel Sermon

1. My motivation to preach on this parable this morning.
2. This parable is puzzling. Like every good story, it has good guys and bad guys, a hero, so to speak.
3. Who do you identify with most in this story?
Make a note in your mind of your answer and we will come back to it later.

I am going to ask three questions about this parable this morning:

- 1) How would Jesus's disciples understand this parable when he first told it?
- 2) What does it say to us today?
- 3) What does this parable teach us about how to live?

Capitalistic Westerners read this parable and unconsciously assume that it represents a society that is somewhat like ours today.

- amassing wealth as proper and laudable.
- celebrates and idolizes the wealthy.

In this context, the two servants who aid in the rich man's scheme are the stories heroes and the third is a lazy good-for-nothing.

Taken in this way it puts a kind of homespun capitalism on the lips of Jesus.

1. How did the disciples understand this parable?
 - "limited good" society.
 - seeking "more" was *always* morally wrong.

If the pie was only so big, and if it had already been distributed, then taking more meant taking it away from someone else.

Honorable people, therefore, did not try to get more of anything, and those that did were considered thieves. So from the peasant's point of view the two servants who increased their master's wealth would have been viewed as simple robbers who participated in extortionist schemes.

The **hero of the story** is the one who didn't seek more, but also who didn't lose the wealth. He is the only one in the story acting in a responsible way. In fact, by burying the money, he was following **rabbinic law** that considered burying the best way to protect someone else's money.

However, the peasants of Jesus day had learned the hard way that life was just like that parable. The rich always take care of their own, stealing from the poor and rewarding those that help them do so: "Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you scattered no seed."

Verse 29 seems to be a restatement of what the peasants experience: “For to everyone who has will more be given, and he will have an abundance. But from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away.” Peasants would have understood that as a **truism**. It resonated with their experiences.

BUT WHAT ABOUT THE STRONG REBUKE AT THE END OF THE STORY? “And cast the worthless servant into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” Bad master! Even clearer in Luke because the servants protest taking the one coin away!

Told from a Western point of view it would be truly terrible news for the poor and needy.

- It would mean that every master is a “god figure” and therefore
- our Christian God will treat them the same way the rich had always treated them.

If told from the peasant point of view, however, the story condemns the actions of the rich and those who cooperate with them by holding these actions up to view and exposing them for what they are.

2. So, how can we understand this story today?

I remember as a child thinking that to expect the market to grow every year was crazy. And it turns out, it is.

The Big Short and housing market crash in 2008

It makes it clear that people suffered as the banks created rapacious money making schemes and then crashed, bringing down world markets with them.

We don’t often think of our economy as a limited pie with only so many slices like in the ancient Middle East, but I would like to challenge you to do so. And if so, how would it change your

- lifestyle?
- Your giving habits?

And if the economy is too abstract a notion to think of in this way, think of our resources as limited goods, and especially think of **our environment** as a limited good. I’m sure you’ve heard the stats about America’s consumption habits.

The Sierra Club’s Dave Tilford reports that “America is less than 5 percent of world population, but uses one-third of the world’s paper, a quarter of the world’s oil, 23 percent of the coal, 27 percent of the aluminum, and 19 percent of the copper,” He goes on to say that “Our per capita use of energy, metals, minerals, forest products, fish, grains, meat, and even fresh water dwarfs that of people living in the developing world.”

One child born in America has a larger impact on the environment than a dozen children born in a developing country.

3. What does this parable teach us about how to live?

I paired this parable with the reading from Romans to make a point about what we think we need to live a good life.

What drives our consumption and acquisition of wealth?

- a desire to feel safe,
- be happy, in short,
- to live THE GOOD LIFE.

But Paul gives us a different picture of the good life in Romans. The good life, the happy life, is not one in which my needs are met, but the one in which we *are* GOOD, and we are *doing* good:

He says to love each other,

Paul's first command is LOVE. No internal state without a corresponding external behavior.

hate evil, honor others above ourselves, have hope in affliction, be faithful in prayer, bless instead of curse, rejoice with those who are rejoicing, cry with those who are suffering, live at peace, care for our enemies, and overcome evil with good. That's the *good* life! The *secure* life, the *happy* life.

One of my close colleagues is writing a history of happiness studies and I learned from him that Aristotle also linked happiness to goodness. According to Aristotle, "Happiness is an activity of the soul expressing virtue."

But in America we have so closely bound up happiness with material comfort. A myriad of studies, however, show that happiness is a moving target because of a phenomenon known in cognitive psychology as **hedonic adaptation**. We quickly habituate to possessions or circumstances we thought would make us forever happy and move on to pursuits we think will have more lasting effects, only to find that we are soon habituated to our new possession or status and unsatisfied.

But happiness is such an American value that it is guaranteed in the Declaration of Independence!

"YOUR DICTIONARY.COM" sums up our contemporary American understanding of "The **pursuit of happiness** is defined as a fundamental right mentioned in the Declaration of Independence to freely live life in a way that makes you happy, as long as you don't do anything illegal or violate the rights of others."

A cynic might question the political motivations of our founding fathers' use of happiness as an incentive: one argument is that they knew the pursuit of happiness is a Sisyphian trick and used it to entice workers to keep their noses to the grindstone, knowing full well how necessary their labor was to the maintenance of the status quo, of which they were members. The founding fathers had all read enlightenment thinkers David Hume and Adam Smith, both of whom wrote on the deceptiveness of the notion that money provides happiness.

But I don't think this is the case. I think they thought more like Plato and Aristotle and conflated happiness and virtue and were prescribing the pursuit of happiness, like the apostle Paul, as a path to righteousness. Communal good, communal virtue. They *were* neoclassical thinkers, after all.

WHO ARE YOU IN THE STORY? Let's now go back to my question about how you see yourself in the parable of the talents: Are you the one who has been given much? Or are you the one who has been given little and had it taken away? Or... are you the bad master that creates these extortionist situations?

To conclude, what is the life lesson we take away from this parable? It was easy for Jesus's disciples to see the immorality of the kind of greed demonstrated in the parable. It's far more difficult for us to see the ramifications of our consumption habits.

- people half way around the world working at slave wages to build our gadgets.
- our wasteful habits impact the environment.

But our lifestyles are so habituated that change seems impossible.

The very next sentence after the parable of talents in Matthew is the word **BUT**...

BUT JESUS'S WORLD IS A DIFFERENT WORLD THAT DOESN'T OPERATE IN THIS WAY!

"But when the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him, then He will sit on His glorious throne."

So I want to suggest that we **address the desires that push us to want more, more, more**. In every vain desire is a pain, a loneliness that only God can fulfill.

Coming of the Kingdom of the Lord will end all suffering, **BUT HOW CAN WE BRING THE KINGDOM TODAY?** Love—not just as an internal emotion, but as a way of life, in service to each other.

And that's why we are here, to live together as God has called us, in a radically different way. This is the good life. And that's the good news of the gospel.