

Responsibility according to ability

The parable of the talents speaks of investment practices, or success in investments. And, of course, at the present time, we live in a world where getting a 100% return on an investment is not all the likely, in most circumstances.

However, in this parable, the first and second servants receive x amount of money, the talent, which was a form of currency at the time, and were able to invest it in such a way so as to give a return of 100% to their master. Their master, of course, was exceedingly happy about that, and indicated that they would receive fresh responsibility of a greater sort, because they had shown themselves faithful in a “little”—significant words.

The third servant, however, was given one talent—still a sizeable amount in its own way—and decided that he would simply bury this amount of money in the ground. And, when the master returned, and called for some accounting from the various servants, this one individual replied that he had been given the one talent but he knew that his master was a harsh individual, “gathering where you did not scatter seed, reaping where you did not sow”. That was one of the complaints of the servant.

And the master, at this point, called him a “wicked and lazy slave”, and, furthermore, indicated that he ought to have given his money to the bankers. At least, he would have got interest back on the investment. As we know, that’s currently not only always the case. If we give money to the bankers, it may be eaten up partly in service charges, or investment fees. So it’s not a fail-proof method. But, apparently, at that time, it was considered to be a pretty sure investment to give it to the bankers.

Now, sermons on this text have, maybe, traditionally, looked at the successful servants—those people who had invested a certain amount of money and received 100% return on the investment. And, perhaps, those sermons have devoted less attention to the servant who simply hid his money in the ground.

But I would like to devote some attention to looking at this third character in the parable, the servant who is characterized by his master as a “lazy and worthless servant”.

Certainly, this man made a rather hasty comment concerning his master, how he was a harsh individual. Also, the servant indicated that he was afraid, and therefore hid this money in the ground. Well, he wasn’t afraid to say what he did to the master, which was going out on a limb, certainly. In any case, the return on the investment was poor.

Certainly, the third individual is not somebody we would like to emulate. But I think there is another side of that person, because this third person hits on something important. This master has gone away, and he expects his servants to fulfil the task that has been given to them. Where is the master with all this responsibility now put on the shoulders of his servants? So the third servant has a point. The master is away.

And, one could say something about the nature of God here. God, of course, is invisible. And, in fact, the book of Isaiah makes this comment, “Truly, you are a God who hides himself, O God of Israel, the Saviour.” A striking sort of comment. But that is the nature of God. God is not grasped by us. He is always known as eluding human grasp. He is “I AM WHO I AM”, for example.

So, throughout the scriptural witness to God, there is the sense that God cannot be held onto by human beings. But we see, in the words of Job, “the outskirts of God’s ways”. No person sees God face to face. But Moses could say, after the fact, so to speak, after God had passed. And that’s sort of the way it is with us. We don’t see God directly. But we can see certain signs, particularly when God has passed, when God has accomplished his deed, and we are looking back on it.

In fact, as part of the faith of Israel, and then the faith of the New Testament, there is sometimes expressed the sense that God is absent, and, therefore, we call in God, who feels to us to be absent. Even Jesus uttered the prayer, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” But, beyond that sense of God being absent, the faith of Israel exclaims and so does the Christian faith exclaim, that God responds to such laments, and draws near to us, and is a source of support to us.

One of the amazing qualities of the Christian faith is that we believe that a critical thing has happened through Jesus’ death on the cross. Now, there is nothing visible there, to the naked eye, shall we say, of God’s presence. But, after the fact, after God has passed through, in terms of the resurrection, we see that God has indeed been active in the apparently opaque quality of the crucifixion of Jesus—the darkness associated with that.

So the third servant had a point, in a way, that God seems sometimes to be distant. But the other side of the equation is that, when we seek God, beyond the apparent absence of God, we do find God’s answer, and we do see God’s signs, after he has passed through, so to speak.

Now this third servant decided that he was afraid, and, therefore, hid money in the ground. That was a sure-fire thing to hold on to the money. But the other side of it is that, when we deal with God, who hides himself, and yet we see glimpses of his activity in the world, the thing that God really wants from us is that little thing that we call faith.

Faith is that quality which, to our mind, seems extremely small, and extremely insignificant, but something which has a huge impact on our lives.

And one of the characteristics of faith is that we are followers. Jesus didn’t say to his disciples, right off the bat, “I’m going to make you sit on thrones in the kingdom of heaven.” He did say that somewhat later. But he said to his disciples, to begin with, “Come, follow me”. These little steps we take, the steps of faith, is what God ultimately requires of us.

This master complained to his servant, “At least, you could have given the money to the bankers, and then I would have had interest.” Well, the small thing, the “least thing” that we could do, in response to God, is have this faith—“follow God, the next step of the way”, in response to how God would have us live our lives; and, by that means, find that we are, indeed, on the course of faithfulness to God, who calls us. Faith, a seemingly insignificant thing, is yet, really, what God wishes of us, which, in the long term, translates into faithfulness, and greater responsibility.

Now, in this parable of Jesus, the words of the master to the disobedient servant are given, “You could at least have given the money to the bankers, in order that I might have interest when I returned.” Well, another “least” quality, another apparently insignificant quality, that we are called to have, is repentance. It seems so small, it seems so insignificant—changing a course of action, changing an attitude. But the fruits of that repentance can be, indeed, significant in our lives.

Martin Buber, the Jewish theologian, tells, in his book, *I and Thou*, how he was a university chaplain; or he was in a chaplaincy role in some institution. And he was busy this particular day. And a young man came to see him. And the young man spoke to him. He, more or less, heard what the young man had to say. And then he heard, some time later, that the young man had committed suicide. After that, of course, he became much attentive to what other people were saying to him. One of the fruits of that reflection was the book, *I and Thou*. Other persons, in Buber's terminology, are not so many *Its*, so many objects; they are subjects with their own mystery, certainly their own uniqueness. And we encounter another person, as *I* versus *Thou*, just as our relationship with God is that way—in addition—*I and Thou*.

Lately—and maybe you have experienced this too—I have received a number of e-mails from persons. And, in these e-mails, some very significant things are being said. But, I guess, my brain has been programmed in such a way, perhaps, that, when I receive an e-mail, I just digest it, and then reply quickly. I think of it as a form of communication of basic information. However, people are not using that medium any longer just to communicate basic information. Sometimes, they are saying things that are very significant. And so, an adjustment needs to happen for me—perhaps for you, too—to hear more carefully what is being said, and respond to it in a way that is appropriate and meaningful.

So, one of the “least” things that we can do, which is significant, and which does result in faithfulness, is repentance—changing a course of life, changing attitudes, and bearing fruit out of those attitudes, new direction.

In a way, this unworthy servant has a point, although this unworthy servant behaves in a way that does no good, either for his master, or for himself.

We do know God as one whom we cannot grasp. But God, who hides himself, whom we see, as “in a mirror dimly”—God, nevertheless, calls forth “the least” that we can do—our faith; he calls forth “the least” we can do, our repentance. And the fruit that comes from those attitudes translates into faithfulness, and even greater faithfulness or responsibility that God wishes to give to us, bring to us.