

The Parable of the Talents

This might be called Matthew's Wall Street parable – it's about people investing money in order to make money. And do you remember, in the artist Caravaggio's famous painting of the summons of Matthew by Jesus, how Matthew is seated at a table with busy accountants adding up stacks of coins? So the dynamics of the episode are familiar to Matthew.

This doesn't mean that the parable advocates capitalism. Jesus can play with the workings of an economic system without necessarily sanctifying it. The emphasis is on *an aspect* of the system that Christians might emulate, namely learning how to take a chance, to invest their lives in something really profitable, i.e. Christ's Gospel of Grace, the way secular brokers and traders invest in something less sublime. In today's parable two servants double their master's money while he is away while the third is too timid to chance it – and is booted into the darkness outside. He's a loser and our society doesn't like losers.

St. Luke's Gospel has a variation on this theme – within a bigger picture. Luke's version as told by Jesus speaks of an aristocrat who goes on a journey "into a far country to receive kingly power and then return." Some scholars suggest that Jesus had recent history in mind, familiar to his hearers in Judea, for upon the death of King Herod the Great in 4 BC, his son Archelaus travelled to Rome to be confirmed as Herod's successor – despite much opposition at home. And, when he became successor for a short period of time, he made his opposition suffer severely; he was brutal and eventually removed.

At any rate the aristocrat in Luke's parable, possibly reflected in this not too distant news event, distributes a gold coin a piece to ten servants and says invest it until he returns. When he returns he finds one servant had increased his one gold coin by ten, another by five – while a third had wrapped his up in a handkerchief for fear of losing it. So his coin was transferred to the fellow who made ten and this now royal master (much like the real Archelaus) executed his opponents en masse. Any way *the moral is the same as Matthew's version*: take a chance on love or wind up unloved.

Personally I don't like such parables where the losers are condemned and the good guys are rewarded. Sounds too much like a third grade catechism lesson. I prefer another parable in Luke, the one about the Pharisee and the tax collector in the service of the Romans and therefore despised by his fellow Jews. The story is quite simple.

They both go to the temple to pray. The Pharisee goes right up front and says: *O God, I thank you that I am not like the rest of humanity—greedy, dishonest, adulterous—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week, and I pay tithes on my whole income.* The tax collector on the other hand and from a respectful distance doesn't even raise his eyes to heaven but simply, candidly pleads, *O God, be merciful to me a sinner.*

There's a parable that really captures the spirit of Jesus – compassion for all of us who stand at the end of the line. The loser comes in first! As Jesus says, *the latter went home justified, graced, and very likely ready to change his way of life.*