

**“Losing The Little You Have”**

(Matthew 25.14-30)

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**Introduction**

Today’s Gospel is a parable.

It’s not an allegory – the harsh landowner is not God!

It’s a parable of the Kingdom – Jesus is talking about *this* life... here and now.

It’s not about reward and punishment in the next life.

So, what do we need to see differently, in order to live in the vision of abundant life that Jesus called *The Kingdom*?

**The Parable of the Talents**

The parable goes like this...

A powerful landowner goes away for an extended time, and leaves his business in the hands of three senior slaves. On return, he calls them to account for what they’ve done in his absence.

Two of them have done well, achieving healthy returns on the master’s capital. They are rewarded.

But the third has hidden the money away... and although able to return it intact, has no profit to show for it. This third slave is castigated and punished.<sup>1</sup>

We’ve tended to teach this as a moral tale... a tale encouraging us not to hide away our gifts and talents, but instead to exercise them in the world... in service of others... so they may bear fruit to God’s ultimate glory.

And that’s perfectly fine advice... *except this is a parable*, not an improving moral tale.

Such exposition ignores<sup>2</sup> the shock ending...

Jesus ends the parable like this...

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<sup>1</sup> He is thrown out into *utter darkness*.

<sup>2</sup> Indeed it wilfully closes eyes and ears to it.

The master says of the third slave, the one who kept his capital buried...

*‘Take the money from him, and give it to the one who already has ten times as much. For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an outrageous abundance; but from those who have nothing, even the little they have will be taken from them.’ (28-9)*

Now that’s horrible! Yuck!

But it’s on this verse, this shock-ending, that the parable turns...

What on earth is Jesus trying to stir-up in us here?

### ***The Parable of the Talents in its Original Context***

The parable needs to be heard in its original social context – as the first listeners heard it – before we hear it speak to us here and now...

In ancient Palestine – the time of Jesus – a tiny elite were rich and the great majority were poor... really poor.

Before the Romans, ordinary Jewish society had been stable – built on peasant farming, small land-holdings, traditional crafts, and an agrarian village society that emphasised hospitality and sharing. It wasn’t affluent but it was ok for ordinary people. It held together around this mutual responsibility of the village community, enshrined in the hospitality and justice codes of their faith. People had a responsibility to look after their neighbours.

But all that was swept aside under Roman occupation.

In came a new rich elite, made up of Romans, ‘Greeks’ and those Jews who prospered via collaboration. They usually lived in the new Roman-Greek cities, even though the base of their wealth typically came from landholdings in the country. They were absentee landlords. The rich made loans to peasant farmers for seed to grow their crops. Interest rates were outrageous – as much as 200% – and when the crops failed, the land was appropriated as collateral. Many peasants in Jesus’ time had lost their land, and were hired casually as day labourers on large estates owned by the wealthy.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Some were reduced to slavery.

This is the life we hear described in numerous of Jesus' parables<sup>4</sup>... and this is the world of the ordinary people listening to him.

Under this pressure, village structure collapsed, socially as well as economically. People gave up communal sharing, and retreated to that desperate *'every man for himself'* mentality... hiding away the little they had left... hoarding it for *'me and mine'*. Community broke down as people scabbled to retain the little they had.

That's the world we see in this parable. The absentee landowner is expecting his 'managers' to increase his wealth. Their 'trading' is this business of extending loans at exorbitant rates, in order to grab more land from the poor – that's where the fabulous returns are coming from. When we tell this story as a moral tale, we laud the first two slaves, the successful operators. But that would not have been the view of the peasant crowd, gathering around Jesus as he tells this story. Far from it! They would be seen as the enemy... exploiters of the poor... collaborators.

And what of the third slave... the man who hides *his* loan capital in the ground? The crowd would perfectly identify with *him*... in his fear.

*"Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed, so I was afraid..."*

He's right – the landowners were hard operators, and they were ruthless in their expectation. Getting on the wrong side of them was to court certain punishment. That's the way it was. So, it's entirely reasonable that this third 'manager' is afraid... It's perfectly understandable that he tries to play it safe by hiding his master's money away. The crowd understand that – it's what they'd do in his place,

**But...** *in doing so he ends up losing everything.*

*In doing so he ends up losing everything!!!!*

The key verse is (29)...

*"For 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."*

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<sup>4</sup> It's the world he knew. Indeed, it may well be that his father, Joseph, was a farmer that had lost his land. The word we usually translate as carpenter – an honourable trade – may better be rendered as 'odd job man'.

This is **not** the voice of God, but it **is** the voice of the Roman *empire*...

This is **not** the voice of Jesus, but it **is** the voice of the world – a world the poor knew all too well. No matter how hard they laboured, no matter how hard they struggled, the big-men took the tiny little they had... all of it and more. The rich got richer, while they, the ordinary people, were ground deeper into poverty.

Jesus' parable speaks of what they know from bitter experience.

So, what is Jesus's subversive intent here?

What's he hoping might break open?

Well... imagine a village elder trudging back to his home, after hearing this parable... turning it over in his mind. *'It's true – they're taking everything and leaving us with nothing.'*

At first there's only bitter sadness, but then in a moment of grace, the light goes on... *'He's right... Jesus. There is no point in trying to hold onto the little I've got, because it will only get taken from me in the end. I might as well risk it all with God... because in the end, it's the only hope we've got.'*

And so, he goes home... pulls back the hearthstone... and gathers the little hoard of coins he's hidden there... The last of his money, kept in the hope of saving his family from total disaster. Then he calls a village meeting...

And when everyone's assembled, he spreads his tiny stash on the table... looks his neighbours in the eye and says... *'This is our money. We've got to risk it with God and with each other. Who's prepared to share the little they've got left?'*

Do you hear the good news? At *that* moment, that village elder, who previously was chained in fear, self-survival and despair... is free... There and then, he's *living in the Kingdom*. And his village has just a chance of new life. Sure, it's a slim chance, but it's the sort of action that might *spark something*... Who knows what GOD could do with such faithfulness.

But regardless of what the others choose, *that* man is free... and he's living in the Kingdom of God.

### **Present Day Application**

And so, in this parable... *'What do we need to see differently... in order to access the Kingdom?'*

This parable accompanies and amplifies that central teaching of Jesus that he returns to often...

*If you grimly hold onto life, wanting to save it, protect it, then you'll actually end-up losing it. But if you open your arms and let it all go... then abundant life flows... and you discover a life beyond your imagining.*<sup>5</sup>

In our society, there is such a strong conviction saying 'you have to hold-on to what you've got'... and many of us have this unconsciously embedded within.

We share the fear of the third slave... that if we don't protect what we have, we'll lose it... indeed we may end up losing everything.

This certainly applies to money and possessions, but it runs much deeper – fear of losing the regard of others (status)... fear of losing relationships... even of losing love itself... and more.

But Jesus tells us this fear is illusory... it's built on the false assumption that we *can* possess and control anything in the first place.

The Gospel reminds us that everything is God's... nothing is our possession.

Everything comes as a gift from God – it comes and goes as God determines, and we can't hold onto it.

Even our very breath is God's – it's given to us by God, and it will be taken from us when the time comes. We control none of this.

We learn to live beyond our fear... we learn to let go... when our eyes open to Christ's revelation that God is Love... and this Love will never abandon us... and that all that comes to us, even suffering and death, is divine gift and blessing.

This is the reality today's parable invites us into...

To apply this parable here and now, is to consider the many places in our life where we are holding-on... the places where we feel we have to protect ourselves.

And imagining what it would be like to let go...

To trust in God's love to hold us, carry us... never let us go.

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<sup>5</sup> See Luke 9.23-25, John 12.24

## **Conclusion**

In the last years before he died, Henri Nouwen was exploring a new metaphor of faith... being like a trapeze artist, the one they call the 'flyer', who lets go of their grip on the bar... and flies/falls through open space... trusting/knowing that GOD is there... and GOD will catch us.