

Parables of the Talents and the Minas

Lk 19:11-27, Mt 25:14-30

BACKGROUND

- “A *talent* was a measure of weight varying in size from about 26 to 36 kg. This became a unit of coinage in that it referred to a certain amount of metal, either gold, silver or copper. While this value differed at various times and in various places, it was also comparatively high.” [BCT 64] For comparison, the annual revenue paid to Herod Antipas by Galilee and Peraea together was 200 talents.
- The *mina* in Luke’s parable, sometimes translated “pound”, was about three months’ wages for a laborer.
- *Regarding interest*: “Doubling one’s investment (Mt 25:20, 22) might be regarded as a reasonable minimum return to expect in the ancient economy...” (Craig S. Keener’s commentary on Matthew). And regarding the parable of the minas: “Each of the slaves was given a mina... which they would probably entrust to the moneychangers. Because of exorbitant interest rates in the Greco-Roman world and because only a few people had significant capital, those doing business could quickly multiply their investments... It was not unusual for investors to make returns such as those these servants report; nor was it unusual for rulers to reward profitable servants who proved their administrative skills” (Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary*).
- *Regarding the Parable of the Minas*: “The nobleman going to a far country to receive a kingdom reminds us irresistibly of a vassal making the pilgrimage to Rome to be made king. Herod the Great had received his kingdom that way. In his will he divided his realm between three of his sons, all of whom in due course went to Rome to press their claims. Archelaus had been left Judea with the title king, but the people detested him and sent representative to ask that he be not given the kingdom. He had given them good reason for hating him. At the first Passover after his accession, for example, he had massacred about 3,000 of his subjects (Josephus, *War* ii. 10-13). He was a thoroughly bad ruler. But the emperor confirmed him in the place of authority, though he denied him the title ‘king’ until he should prove worthy of it (which he never did). There would be special fitness in an allusion to Archelaus in this region, for he had built a magnificent palace in Jericho [which Jesus was passing through on the way to Jerusalem] and also made an aqueduct for irrigation purposes (Josephus, *Antiquities* xvii.340).” [Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans) 1992.]

QUESTIONS

1. The parable of the talents comes during the fifth of Jesus’ discourses in Matthew, shortly following his Olivet apocalypse (24:1-35). Based on your interpretation of the latter, who is the master in this parable, and when does his return refer to?¹ Who was Jesus speaking to? (Cf. 24:3; 25:14.)
2. Historically, there’s been no shortage of interpretations of the talents, even among those (such as Jeremias and Dodd) who avoid allegorical interpretations. (See handout listing some interpretations.) What *could* the talents refer to? What do you think they refer to? The following may or may not be significant: The amount each is given corresponds to his ability (15); The amounts differ from one servant to the next; They are

¹ There isn’t universal agreement on this: Michael Green presents a tentative interpretation of the Olivet apocalypse as culminating in the fall of Jerusalem, while N. T. Wright argues that the *parousia* of Mt 24 is Jesus’ final journey to Jerusalem [*Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress), p. 632].

multiplied by the first two servants; The talents are specifically given to the master's servants (14); The amounts are huge; The one who fails to put his talents to work is damned (30).

3. Given your answer to the previous question, how does v. 29, "For everyone who has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him," make sense? Ben Chenoweth points out that the only other place Jesus says this, aside from parallel passages, is in Mt 13:11-12 (also Lk 8:18), where he's referring to the secrets of the kingdom of heaven. (He also quotes a study showing that in Matthean doublets like this, the second passage tends to expand upon the first.) Is it possible that Jesus is referring to the same thing here? As Chenoweth says,

Some of his disciples go out immediately and 'make increase'. In other words, they make use of the knowledge that has been given to them in a way that brings about a profit for Jesus and they are consequently rewarded. However, some of the disciples sit on that knowledge; they keep it to themselves; they act in a way that does not result in profit for Jesus and they are punished as a result.

(See also 1 Cor 4:1-5.)

4. We have seen above that doubling one's investment wasn't out of the ordinary. Yet often this parable is taken as advocating risk taking. For instance, David Steinmetz writes:

There is no responsible use of the gifts of God which does not involve taking risks. That is a theological point, reiterated in the sayings of Jesus, but it is so true of human growth and development in general that it hardly seems to require theological elaboration. I never grow as a human being unless I cross the safe boundaries I have set for myself already and make myself vulnerable to failure, rejections and loss. I never learn to speak French, until I am willing to be laughed at by people who speak it fluently. I never establish a friendship, until I am willing to be rebuffed by someone whose good will and esteem I desperately long to have. I can never gain more until I am willing to lose the little I already have.

Bernard of Clairvaux observed that people who do not progress in the spiritual life, regress. Stasis is impossible. There is no standing still, no burying of capital allowed. Martin Luther underscored Bernard's point when he described the Christian life as *semper in motu*, always in motion. [DCS 175]

Is the master rewarding risky behavior? Does scripture elsewhere require risk-taking behavior? (Where?)

5. Evaluate this further conclusion by David Steinmetz:

Where the judgment of God is concerned, the question is never how much I have been given, but what I have done with what I have... Exactly the same point is made in the opening chapters of the Letter to the Romans. The Jews were given the Law and the rite of circumcision; the Gentiles had only the voice of natural law and of conscience to guide them with respect to the will of God. But Jews and Gentiles were not judged according to the same standard, but according to the degree of privilege which each had actually received.

6. If we assume the servants represent Jesus' disciples, we see here a cautionary tale regarding attitudes. What is the wicked servant's attitude? How might this have represented the attitude present of some of Jesus' listeners? How does your attitude towards God affect your work for his kingdom?
7. The parables we've considered so far in this discourse (the night watchman, the faithful and wicked stewards, the ten maidens and the talents) all involve an absent master (or bridegroom). After 2,000 years,

the Church is still awaiting the return of its master. How specifically does *each* of these four parables speak to the existential dilemmas of the modern Christian, who wonders why God seems so silent and so absent?

8. Is it significant that the third servant, the one who chooses to do nothing, is the one who received the least?
9. How does the parable of the minas differ from the parable of the talents? What question is Jesus addressing in the parable of the minas? How does the second “plot” in this parable interact with the now familiar stewardship plot? Do the minas represent anything, and if so, what? Is it significant that each receives the same amount?

Fun fact: “The non-canonical Gospel of the Hebrews finds it helpful to vilify the third servant in its version of this parable. He is painted as a reprobate who squanders his master’s money on ‘harlots and flute girls.’” [E. Carson Brisson, *Interpretation*, **56**, 307 (2002).]

References:

BCT: Ben Chenoweth, *Tyndale Bulletin*, **56**, 61 (2005).

MSN: Michael S. Northcott, *Theology*, **107**, 241 (2004).

Michael Green, *The Message of Matthew* (Downer’s Grove, IL: IVP).

DCS: David C. Steinmetz, *Interpretation*, **34**, 172 (1980).