

INVESTORS GUIDE

MATTHEW 25:14-30
LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH
BY: RYAN DUECK
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First, I want to thank you for your prayer and support during my time out in Winnipeg a few weeks ago, while I was pastor in residence at CMU.

It was a very full and rewarding week, with chapel talks and devotionals at worship nights and various roundtable discussions with student leaders, and conversations with those interested in writing or pastoral ministry and many informal conversations with faculty and students over meals, in hallways.

It was a real gift to be freed to spend a week in this way and to have the church's support, whether on a financial level in taking care of my travel, or prayer support, or even just the general interest that many of you have expressed in my time there. I know that CMU is a place that is near and dear to many of your hearts, and this was a really great opportunity for me to see why.

I have conveyed this in a number of informal contexts already, but I also want to be sure that I pass along thanks from the CMU faculty and staff as well. On a number of occasions, people told me, "Make sure you thank your congregation back in Lethbridge for allowing you to be here this week! We really appreciate churches making their pastors available to support and encourage our students and staff!"

So, thank you. From me to you. From CMU to you. Your generosity and support is most appreciated.

I also want to thank Kerby for his thoughtful sermon on peace and preparedness last Sunday. I very much appreciated your sermon and have heard the same from others.

Well, we continue along in this long stretch of discourse near the end of the gospel of Matthew, between Jesus' entry into Jerusalem and his eventual crucifixion.

In Matthew, 21-23, we looked at Jesus' confrontation with the religious leaders of Israel.

Last week, we moved to Matthew 25. Jesus' conversation partners have shifted from the religious leaders of Israel to his own disciples. We are now in the middle of a conversation about watchfulness—about how to live in the in-between-time after Jesus is gone and before he comes again.

And, as is so often the case, whether Jesus is talking to rigid, rule-bound Pharisees or his closest friends, he speaks in *parables*, in stories.

A reminder about the nature of parables.

Parables are not doctrinal statements, philosophical propositions, or timeless theological statements. **They are *stories* told to make a particular point to a particular people in a particular context.**

They were often meant to shock, to upend expectations, to jolt and make their hearers re-evaluate their assumptions.

Today's parable likely sounds familiar to another parable we have encountered this fall. It has many similar features to the parable of the workers in the vineyard (Matt. 21:33-46) where a master goes away and leaves what he has left behind to others, expecting good things when he returns.

In our story today, we have a wealthy man who went on a journey and rather than leaving a vineyard to keep, entrusts an enormous amount of wealth to his servants.

A "talent" would have been the equivalent of around fifteen years wages for an ordinary day labourer, so even the servant who received only one talent was receiving an extraordinary sum.

The first two servants have a pretty impressive return on investment—they each double the amount they were initially given.

The third, however—the one who had been given the least—buries his money in the ground in order to be sure not to lose what he had been given.

The master praises the first two and grants them even further privileges and responsibilities. But the third—the one who hid his talent in the ground out of fear—he treats very harshly indeed.

What is this parable meant to tell us? There are a number of angles we could take here.

The first and most obvious interpretation of this parable is that we are to **invest what we have been given wisely.**

On Thursday evening this week, I attended parent teacher interviews. I bounced around from room to room, hearing from teachers about what our kids were doing well in, what they might need to work harder at, etc.

It brought back some memories of my own time in school. And they weren't particularly pleasant memories. ☺

I don't remember everything that my teachers used to say about me, but I do remember a fairly consistent refrain emerging out of meetings with teachers: Ryan is a reasonably bright student... *But he needs to apply himself!*

At the time, I kind of shrugged these kinds of comments off. They were just things that adults in positions of authority over me liked to say to make me do what they wanted.

But as I've gotten a bit older, and as I've become a parent myself, my attitude has changed a bit.

We have all been given gifts—things that only we can do in precisely the way we can do in precisely the place God has put us. We don't have the *same* gifts, of course. In the parable each servant is given different amounts, and the same is true for us.

But the point isn't how much we've been given or even *what* we've been given, but *how* we are using what we've been given.

We've all seen people waste their talents, haven't we? It's a real shame. We lament the loss that this is when we see it in our families, churches, and neighbourhoods.

The simple truth is that the world *needs* your gifts. Your community needs your gifts, your family, your school, your church.... When we fail to use what we are given, we deprive those around us of something real and valuable!

Using our gifts is not just about maximizing personal potential or building self-esteem here! This is about spending ourselves wisely in the service of God and neighbour!

Another lesson we could take from this story is the **importance embracing risk rather than giving in to fear**

Many of us wonder if the third servant isn't perhaps being treated more than a little unfairly in this story. What's so terrible about wanting to protect what he was given? Surely this strategy would be preferable to a risky investment where he *lost* what he had been given, right?

I'm not so sure.

First, it's worth paying attention to the servant's response to the master.

What's the first thing he says when the master returns and asks him to give an account of his use of the money?

“Master, I knew that you are a hard man...”

His first instinct is to direct attention *away* from himself and his own decision, and to blame the master. *You made me do this! I was afraid of you because you're not fair!*

Isn't this just like us as human beings? How often do we, when confronted about our own behaviour and choices—especially when they've had undesirable consequences—seek to deflect attention *away* from ourselves?

Yes, I failed the test, but I had a terrible teacher...

Yes, I missed that deadline, but I'm so overworked...

Yes, I've made some bad choices, but my upbringing wasn't good...

We are very good at playing the “victim” card, and it has been thus since the Garden of Eden, when Adam, confronted by God about his own sin, said the famous words... *The woman you put here with me—she gave me some fruit and I ate it...* (Genesis 3:12).

The third servant tries to place the blame for his failure to invest what he was given on the master. He is *afraid* and his fear leads him to be protective and defensive, to refuse to accept responsibility for what he was given.

What about the question of risk more generally when it comes to the life of faith?

I hear something like this frequently, both in church and non-church circles.

*There's so much that we can't know for sure.... Who can say which religion is true? Who can say if there really is a God who cares about us? Who can say if Jesus really is the way, the truth, and the life? There are so many people who believe so many different things in our world—isn't it kind of arrogant to assume that we have **the** truth?*

And on and on it goes.

These are important questions. They are questions worth thinking deeply about, and probing behind and around and within.

But more often than not, it seems to me, these questions represent the end of the conversation rather than the beginning.

They become an excuse to not give ourselves fully to *anything*.

Who can really say? becomes Who really cares?

Apathy wins the day, and we kind of default to either a bland, inclusive secularism that is mostly devoted to personal happiness and leisure, or a half-hearted Christianity that mostly consist in vague beliefs about a God “out there” somewhere who is a pretty nice guy on the whole and whose interests are more or less the same as ours... And our faith has no real conviction or commitment behind it.

Maybe part of what Jesus is saying in this parable is:

To be a human being is to risk with your life. You will never know as much as you would like. You will probably never be able to prove the truth to your satisfaction. So what? Faith is part of life. What and how and with whom will you risk?

Blaise Pascal memorably said it like this: “Yes; but you must wager. It is not optional. You are embarked.”

One commentator I came across this week summarized it well:

The greatest risk of all, it turns out, is not to risk anything, not to care deeply and profoundly enough about anything to invest deeply, to give your heart away and

in the process risk everything. The greatest risk of all, it turns out, is to play it safe.¹

Finally, a word about the conclusion of this story? If we're honest, I think most of us would say this make us squirm a bit.

The ones who have plenty already will get more while the one who has little will have that taken away?!

Is this manifesto on the virtues of industrious capitalism? The rich get richer and the poor get poorer?!

What about all this “blessed are the poor” business? What about the upside down kingdom where the last are first and the first last?

Is Jesus saying that we have to earn our way into the kingdom of heaven? That only those who demonstrate the proper return on investment will be allowed in?

Well, the first thing to say is that if we're squirming here, that's probably a good thing, because remember, making people uncomfortable is what Jesus' parables are *supposed* to do!

Endings like this remind us that Jesus does not always fit comfortably in our nice, neat theological boxes. We would prefer it, no doubt, if the story went a different way—if the master patted the third servant on the head kindly, gave him a hug and said, “Don't worry about it, no big deal...” and then gave him another talent to try again.

The ending is much harsher than that—I think in part to simply remind us that the choices we make in life *matter*.

We are not quivering, fearful victims of a severe master but children of a generous heavenly father who thinks quite highly of us and gives us extraordinary gifts—gifts like freedom, responsibility, skill, creativity, resourcefulness...

A heavenly father who sets us in a beautiful world and says, “Be fruitful, multiply! Go! Make something out of what you have been given!”

¹ John M. Buchanan, “Pastoral Perspective on Matthew 25:14-30,” in *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol. 4* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 310.

Even in the beginning, the point of creation wasn't to protect and preserve some kind of pristine paradise, as so many assume, but to build, to develop, to grow, to cultivate, to *flourish!*

The harsh ending is, in some ways, a testament to how highly the master thinks of his servants!

But...

I also think it is here that we have to be reminded that parables are contextual stories, told to particular people at particular times in particular places for particular reasons.

Jesus told this parable to his disciples, before he went to the cross, as a way of encouraging them to invest themselves wisely in his absence, to remind them of the urgency of things. They did not—*could* not—know when the master would return (and neither do we)!

But this was not the *only* story Jesus told them.

He also told them stories about a long-suffering father who welcomed home his son who had made a mess of his life.

He also told them stories about a lost sheep that the Good Shepherd would go to the ends of the earth to find and bring home.

The stories of Jesus belong together even when—perhaps *especially* when—we are tempted to read them as isolated, umbrella statements about reality. They are all true, even when they might seem to be saying contradictory things.

Any parent knows how this works, right?

Sometimes our kids need to hear, *I know that you can do better than this... I know that you have gifts that you aren't using to your potential... You have a finite amount of time on this planet... Don't waste what you've been given!*

Other times, our kids need to see us with our arms open wide, and hear, *Welcome home. I know you've made mistakes, but you are dearly loved and you always will be. Let's try again.*

Both responses are true.

Jesus does not mean for the parable of the talents to be a summary statement of God's approach to his children—as if only the ones who bring in a profit are worthy.

He is simply saying, *You have been given a gift—an extravagant gift from a generous and loving God... A life!*

Spend it in good ways. The master trusts you.

Each of us has one life. Just one.

Let's invest wisely—in things that matter, things that have eternal value, things that add beauty, meaning, hope, and goodness to the world.

Let's live as "children of light," as Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 5:5.

Let's spend ourselves in good ways.

Amen.

