

Matthew 25:14-30

"Down to Business"

Lee A. Koontz

November 13, 2011

One of the most important things to consider when you're reading the Bible is context. In our Wednesday night Bible study class we are working our way through the book of Romans, and Chuck and I have encouraged everyone in the class to read not just the section that we'll be discussing, but the entire book of Romans every week. The point of doing that is to try to understand how the one little section we'll be studying fits into the larger message of Paul's letter as a whole. In other words, context is important!

In the midst of the recent election day coverage someone told me the story of a woman who entered the Democratic primary for governor of the state of Texas. She was convinced that the Bible had told her she would win the nomination. The reason for this was that when the ballot was printed, her name ended up being the last one in the list of candidates. Seeing this, she remembered Matthew 19:30, which reads, "Many that are first will be last, and the last shall be first". On the basis of that one verse she concluded that her victory was assured. The problem, of course, was that Jesus wasn't talking about elections when he said that. The other

problem was that she didn't get as many votes as other candidates. So, she lost. Hopefully she learned a lesson about the need for interpreting Scripture in its proper context rather than just pulling verses out here and there in order to justify our own wants and needs and desires. History has shown us that taken out of context, scripture can be used to say just about anything.

I mention all of this today because context is very important to understanding our New Testament reading. A popular interpretation of this parable is that it encourages us to discover the gifts and talents that we each have, and to use those talents and gifts in service to God. That's a pretty easy interpretation to make - the word "talent" is right there in the reading! So, assuming that the "talents" in the parable point us toward our own talents and gifts, the parable teaches that everyone has talent. Some have many, and some have few, but everyone has at least something to give. Regardless of how talented we are, God wants us to use our talents and gifts wisely and faithfully instead of wasting them by

doing nothing. That's pretty much the conventional interpretation of this text.¹

But once again, there's a contextual problem here. While there's certainly nothing wrong with the message that we should all use our talents and gifts to glorify God, and indeed there are plenty of passages in the Bible that tell us just that, it's not really what this text is saying. As is the case with all passages of scripture, context is essential to understanding the meaning.

If you read Matthew's gospel, then, from beginning to end, you will note that the parable of the talents comes in a series of parables that Jesus tells his disciple immediately after predicting his own suffering and death. In Matthew 24, Jesus says to his disciples, "They will hand you over to be tortured and will put you to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of my name." Immediately after this series of parables Jesus turns to Jerusalem, where he is arrested and sentenced to death. The fact that the parable of the talents is found between such ominous and foreboding events tells us something about how we are to understand it. It's essential that we understand that surrounding

¹ See Tom Long, *Matthew*, p. 281.

the telling of this parable is a palpable sense of fear. If you read Mark's gospel in particular, you'll see that the disciples follow Jesus into Jerusalem "afraid". And can we blame them? After receiving death threats and hearing Jesus' own dire predictions of what's about to happen, they were probably scared stiff. And *that* is what Jesus is concerned about when he tells them these parables. He sees that the disciples are afraid, and there is a very real possibility that they will become paralyzed by their fears and unable to carry on the work that Jesus has called them to do.

I recently read a book by Thomas Friedman entitled, *Hot, Flat, and Crowded*, in which Friedman speaks encouragingly of our culture's resources and ingenuity when it comes to solving the problems that we face. The problem, of course, is that we let our fears of the world around us get in the way of our ability to confront the challenges before us, and we become paralyzed. Throughout the book, Friedman discusses the power of fear, how fear paralyzes us and prevents us from acting boldly or taking any risks. His point is that too often in our culture, fear of things like death or terrorism or catastrophe becomes an obsession, and ultimately keeps us from dealing with the serious issues of our time. Fear

always leads us to seek the safe way, the comfortable way, the conventional way. Fear does not lead us to take risks or act boldly. In fact, fear prevents us from doing what needs to be done.

It is in this context of fear that we read the parable of the talents. Jesus tells his disciples about the owner of an estate who is about to go on a journey. Before he leaves, however, he gives each of his servants a portion of what he has. The unit of money mentioned is a *talent*, which was an extraordinary amount of money. It was equivalent to approximately nine years of wages, so obviously the master in Jesus' parable isn't just throwing around pocket change. To the first servant he gives five talents. To the second, two. And to the third, one. He merely tells them to go and "trade" with them. That is, he tells them to go and use them. The first servant traded, invested, bought low, sold high, and doubled his money. The second servant does the same thing: invests and doubles his money. Both take significant risks, obviously. They very well could have lost everything. But when they return to their master with their success he praises both and rewards them with even more. He blesses them with more and gives them more. They are then invited in to enjoy the company of their master.

The third servant, however, merely buries his talent in the ground and returns it to his master without having done anything with it. It's important to note that this one-talent servant didn't do anything bad. He wasn't an evil person, and in fact he can be seen as doing something quite prudent with what he was given. Rather than take the risk of losing such a large sum of money and returning to his master empty-handed, he elects to do the safe thing. He does what many of us would have done, in fact. He does what many of us do on a daily basis, which is to make low-risk, safe decisions with our resources. The problem, however - and this is what gets him in trouble with his master - is that what he did, he did out of fear rather than faith. He unfortunately misunderstands who his master is, and this leads him to do the exact opposite of what his master tells him to do! And if there's something of this one-talent servant in all of us, we have to ask whether we are too often guilty of behaving in the same way. How often do we fundamentally misunderstand the kind of God that we serve? How often does it lead us to take the prudent, low-risk, safe path through life rather than take risks, act faithfully and boldly, and simply do what God has instructed us to do?

"Master," the servant says, "I knew you were a harsh man... so I was afraid." He was *afraid*. Afraid, even though his master had just given him and his fellow servants more money than they could earn in years. Afraid, though the master's generosity in giving them far more than they deserve is hard to even imagine. Afraid, even though his master gives out of his own resources and merely tells him to go and trade with it. Use it, he says. No strings attached. Just take it and go.

Nothing in this parable suggests that the master is harsh or fearsome. To the contrary, the master exhibits a God-like benevolence and grace, giving his servants far more than they deserve out of his own resources, and merely telling them to go forth and use it. He is most certainly *not* a harsh man, reaping where he does not sow and gathering from where he does not scatter seed. However, because of the servant's misunderstanding of whom it is that's in charge here, he acts fearfully rather than faithfully. While he is sent out into the darkness, his fellow servants are commended and called "good and trustworthy".

Jesus, of course, wants good and trustworthy servants. He wants servants who will resist the temptation to hold back, to avoid

risks, to let fear direct them rather than faith and trust. William Sloane Coffin once suggested that paralyzing fear is the central problem of the church. He wrote, "While love seeks truth, fear seeks safety. Fear distorts the truth not by exaggerating the ills of the world, but by underestimating our ability to deal with them. It's the protective strategy of deliberate failure that says you can't lose any money if you don't place any bets; and you can't fall out of bed if you sleep on the floor."²

The real tragedy of this parable is that ultimately the third servant gets the very kind of master that he envisions. The more real tragedy is that we do the same thing. If we, the children of a generous, and gracious, and life-giving God nevertheless insist on viewing God as an oppressive, cruel, and fearsome tyrant just waiting to whack us when we step out of line, then we live our lives out in the darkness, in the midst of weeping and gnashing of teeth brought about by our own misunderstanding of who we serve and who's in charge. However, if we truly believe that God is who God says he is, then we simply are called to let our trust in God direct us even in the midst of fear. We are called to trust that God will be

² *Courage to Love*, p. 13.

with us and for us, leading us to take risks and dream dreams beyond what we see around us, leading us to go forth with the most valuable gift we could possibly be given: the gift of the gospel and the promise of God's love and forgiveness, and simply go out with it, and use it, and share it with others. For those who live in the promise that God is generous, and loving, and gracious, they will find more of that love in every single thing they do. "To all those who have, more will be given," Jesus says.

Brothers and sisters, we have so much. God has blessed us with far more than we could ever earn or deserve. As heirs to God's promise of love, and grace, and new life, we are called to get down to business. It's the same business that we or any of the servants in the parable are ever called to do, and it's simply to trust that the Lord God, who has given us more than we could ever ask for, only asks that we live and love and share the gospel of Jesus Christ. We are free to take risks with it, to act boldly because of it, to step out in faith in the midst of fear. But whatever we do, we must not simply leave the gospel behind, buried beneath a mountain of other cares and concerns, or needs and wants, or plans and events. Go, he said. Use it! Remember that in Jesus Christ, God came down to

be among us, became human, became vulnerable, took the risk that human beings would reject and crucify him. Jesus himself was the ultimate risk taker, leaving his ministry in the hands of the twelve, and now in your hands and mine, making the good news our responsibility and, at the end of the day, our greatest privilege and joy.

“Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been trustworthy in a few things. I will put you in charge of many things. Enter into the joy of your master.”

Amen.