

The Gospel according to Matthew was written for the early church, to guide it and hold it together and grow the Kingdom in that difficult period between the Resurrection and Jesus' expected return. Risk and total immersion was the way of discipleship. In those difficult times for the church, the ministry of encouragement was vital. There was no time to hide the Good News in the ground out of fear. Rather, it was a time to encourage each other to share this treasure so that the church may become all that God is calling it to be.

In the Greek text, the word used for “gained” or “made” was used in religious contexts for winning converts. Thus the parable suggests that we are talking about the kind of “profit” a Christian is meant to be aiming at, which has nothing to do with euros. The man, therefore, who dug his single talent was guilty of keeping it purely for himself and not risking its exposure to others who could have benefited from his efforts.

It is worth noting the outcome of faithful service, and of unfaithful service, in this parable. Faithful service led to increased responsibilities in the kingdom of heaven, and eternal joy in the presence of the Master, Jesus Christ. Unfaithful service led to condemnation, the removal of one's stewardship, and an eternity of weeping and gnashing of teeth in outer darkness, away from the presence of our Lord.

You can read this parable as a criticism of a religious tradition which refuses to develop. This is a constant phenomenon of all religions, including our own. Many of the Jews in Jesus' time jealously protected the Law and tradition. They were opposed to any change or any development. In the process, they forgot the original spirit of the Law and naturally were opposed to Jesus, who constantly criticised this stance. There are always those who will want to bury the Spirit of God in the napkin of tradition. This is not the way to abundance and growth.

We know that different people have very different abilities. We learn from experience who is good at what, and we hire people accordingly, entrusting people with tasks in proportion to their ability. We also learn from experience what our own abilities are, and our limitations, and we tend to take on tasks that are possible for us and avoid tasks that are not.

The rich man in today's parable knew the abilities of each of his servants. Before setting out on his journey he took the risk of entrusting his property to each *in proportion to his ability*. He only gave as much responsibility to each of them as they could bear. The first two servants worked according to their ability. The third did not, and just gave back the one talent he had been given, instead of the extra he was capable of gaining.

William Barclay made four useful points in his commentary on this parable:

a. God gives each person different gifts.

Despite our tendencies always to compare ourselves with others, the actual number and quality is not important. We are only asked to make full use of what we have been uniquely given and to use them for the benefit of the community as a whole. When everyone does that, the community is enriched.

b. Our work is never completed.

When the first two servants showed how much they had earned, they were not told they could sit back and rest. No, because of their trustworthiness, even greater responsibilities were given to them. "To everyone who has will be given more, and he will have more than enough."

c. The one who will be punished is the one who does nothing.

The man with one talent did not lose it. He did not do anything at all with it. If he had tried and failed, he would have met compassion and forgiveness. (The image of the master as a "hard man" only emphasises that, if with such a person one should make an effort, all the more should one try where a loving, understanding and compassionate God is concerned.) Even the person with one miserable talent has something to offer to others. It is a sober warning that it is not just those who do evil deeds who will lose out but also those who have no positively good works to show. Saying "But I didn't do anything!" will not get one off the hook!

d. To the one who has more will be given; from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. It seems rather unfair, like robbing the poor to pay the rich. But Jesus is rather saying that those who share

generously the gifts they have been given are likely to find themselves constantly enriched. Those who jealously preserve what they have been given, hoard it and go into their shell in fear of the outside world are likely to shrivel up and die. Those who save their lives, will lose it; those who share generously what they have with others, will find themselves immeasurably enriched. It is the law of the Gospel; it also a law of life which many of us, in practice, find hard to believe.

We may find ourselves in some sympathy with the third servant. What held him back from working according to his ability was fear “*I was afraid, and I went off and hid your talent in the ground*”, and deep down, we are aware how fear can hold us back and keep us from doing what we are capable of. Fear is a more powerful force in the lives of some than others. There can be many reasons for this. Those who have experienced a lot of criticism growing up can develop a fearful approach to life.

One of the main reasons why people do not use their talents is because they have been *belittled* in the past. To belittle is to put someone down, to make them feel small, lessen their sense of self-worth. There are many ways of demeaning another person: cynicism, sarcasm, non-appreciation, taking for granted. The antidote to belittle is to lift people up, to encourage them to value themselves. Unfair criticism can stunt our growth and prevent us from reaching our potential. We hide our talent in the ground. There, at least, it can remain safe but useless.

Jesus knew of the disabling power of fear in people’s lives. It is lovely how often he tells people, “Do not be afraid.” When Peter fell down on his knees saying, “Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man,” Jesus told him, “Do not be afraid, from now on you will fish for people.” When fear threatened to hold Peter back, Jesus called him into a new phase of his life. Jesus wants to be present to us all to release us from our fears.

The parable reminds us that we all have talents. Maybe not spectacular or dramatic like other people who get national or international acclaim; just ordinary, but nevertheless important. Absolutely no one can say they have been gifted with nothing. We have each been graced with our talents for the service of others. If I hide the talents the Lord has given me, others are

thereby deprived. Most of us need some encouragement to place our gifts at the disposal of others. Part of our Christian vocation is to give others courage, to encourage them. Paul writes: *“Build each other up, as indeed you are doing.”*

Some people are simply more talented than others, and this is a gift, not an achievement. What we do with these gifts is the important matter to consider! Do we spend them for the good of others? Do we try to correct systemic wrongs by putting these gifts to work so that they multiply and double in value? Or do we hide our talents, resentful towards the Creator who blessed others more than ourselves, and offer nothing to those who surround us?

What do we do with our time? What do we do with our wealth?
What do we do with our gifts for teaching, for ministering, for healing, for delighting others? When we meet the Lord in time, and as the psalmist says, *“our years come to end like a sigh”*, let it be the sigh of satisfaction for a job well done.

Well done, good and trustworthy servant; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your Lord. AMEN

Use the talents you possess, for the woods would be very silent if no birds sang except the best. Henry Van Dyke