



Let it Go!
Matthew 25:14-30
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I've never thought this parable was too terribly difficult to comprehend. It gives us just one more of Jesus' parabolic teachings about faithfully using the resources God has entrusted us. It's pretty simple, don't bury your resources in the ground, instead go out and double it for the master's benefit, and the master will be pleased. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen. ... Our hymn of reflection comes in the Red Hymnal

Wait ... wait. If you don't mind, can we look at this a little bit more. You didn't think it was going to be that easy did you? See, in looking at this text, you know what stands out? In this parable, Jesus isn't speaking about the relationship between a father and his children, he's not talking about the bridegroom and bridesmaids, he's not talking about the relationship between the sower and the seeds. In the parables that use *these* images, it's pretty clear that Jesus is making a direct connection between God and us. I mean, in the parable of the prodigal Son, it's pretty obvious that God is represented by the father, and the son who returned home is a repentant child of God. It's pretty clear in the parable of the bridesmaids that Jesus is the groom, and that the bridesmaids are symbolic of the prepared or unprepared who are awaiting Christ's return.

In this parable, Jesus uses the relationship between a master and his slaves to tell the story. Don't let this minor detail get overlooked, because this has a huge impact on the story. In talking about the kingdom of God, Jesus begins by saying, "For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them." If we understand this parable in the same way we understand Jesus' other parables, as being directly linked to the relationship between God and humanity, then we would be saying God is the Master (I don't have a problem with this), and that humanity are the slaves (I have a *big* problem with this).

It's hard to accept this teaching as referring to God and God's people because the relationship of master to slave doesn't seem to be the same as the relationship between God and humanity defined elsewhere in the Bible. Now, I am no master of slaves, and I've never been a slave to a master, so it's hard for me to speak first hand in regards to how such a relationship works. However, it just so happens that our nation has a history of slave holding, and indeed, our church was founded by a subset of Methodists in Alexandria in the 1840s who believed in the institution of slavery. So, one doesn't have to look far to get a sense of what the master – slave relationship looked like.

Perhaps in too grossly a summarized definition, in a master-slave relationship, the master has full authority and control over the slave. The slave has no autonomy. Because of the power wielded by the master, the slave is in constant fear that anything they say or do could bring about the master's wrath, and could lead to their punishment and / or death. Fair enough?

In most master-slave relationships, the slave him or herself is considered the property of the master. Not only does the slave have and own nothing of their own, even their person, by definition, belongs to the master.

In the form of a parable, it seems odd to think of this story as analogous to the God – humanity relationship. I mean, yes, God is named in the Biblical text as the creator of all and the One from whom all resources flow. So, yes, everything we have is technically entrusted to us as we are stewards of those resources, which are in their fullness, God's ... so in that way, we are like slaves, who are caring for the master's creation. But in all the pictures of God I've ever seen painted, none have been of God as a whip-wielding slave driver. We do not say humanity has no choice over our actions, like slaves – we are defined as having free will. That's not something that can be said about those enslaved. Perhaps there is more to the parable in instructing us on how we are to relate to God than we'd like to admit ... but for the sake of time, that's another sermon altogether.

This parable is talking about a master – slave relationship, wherein the slave has no autonomy, and wherein the future health and life of the slave is in the hands of the master.

As he prepares to leave on a journey, the master entrusts each slave with part of his property. To one slave he entrusted five talents, to another two, to another one. He entrusted his own wealth to each according to the slave's ability. That is to say, the master knew the slaves well enough (he knew their work ethic, he knew their intelligence, and he the level of trust he held with each) that he divvied up his property to them according to what he knew they could maintain. He knew that one would have a better chance at caring for the property than the other two, and so he gave him more money.

We often say that this parable is speaking of God-given talents – our abilities and capabilities. Perhaps we could make a connection to such physical and mental capabilities, but that too would be another sermon altogether. In telling this parable, Jesus isn't mincing words. Jesus makes it clear, the master is divvying up his property. These talents are referring to wealth, and no small amount of wealth at that.

A talent was equal to 15 to 20 year's worth of wages for a full-time laborer. In the first century, that's worth, well, a talent ... but in today's time, that's a huge chunk of money. Just think, if a full-time laborer here in Alexandria is making an unlivable minimum wage – truly earning only \$7.25 per hour – for 40 hours a week, for 52 weeks a year, then the yearly income would be roughly \$15,000. \$15,000 ... that too is another sermon altogether. But, at that estimation, ONE talent (worth 15-20 years wages) is going to be worth \$250,000 or more.

This master, who is going to be leaving for a while, gives one slave \$250,000 to care for. To the second, he gives \$500,000. To the third, he gives \$1,250,000. Those are impressive amounts to give into the care of people who are themselves considered your property.

Now – if your owner and boss, the person who literally controls your life and livelihood, the person to whom you are entirely obligated gives you one and a quarter million dollars, or even a quarter of a million dollars, to care for, what do you think you would do with the money?

According to the Talmud, which is a central text of Rabbinical Judaism and offers instruction for Jewish life, if a slave is entrusted money from a master, they **should** bury it in the ground.ⁱ “The Talmud recognizes such situations, and reconsiders the abuse of power present in them, and advises that a person put in such danger would do well to bury the money to keep it safe.”ⁱⁱ This makes sense, right? As a slave, the last thing you want to do is take a risk with the property of the master, at the chance you lose it. Such a loss would certainly lead to the death of the slave.

Doing exactly as one would recommend, being wise in the imbalanced power of the slave-master relationship, the third slave, receiving the \$250,000, buried the money in the ground.

The other two slaves, those receiving \$500,000 and \$1,250,000, went out and traded with the money. And in doing so, each doubled the value of the property. They doubled the value! That’s a tremendous feat! These are the kind of investors I want working for me! Even those who know how to make the best of the market today don’t count on more than a 10% increase year to year. Perhaps the master was gone for 10 years, and these slaves maintained a high, but standard return year after year.

The reality is, we don’t know exactly how long the master was gone, but the text indicates it was a lengthy journey. So 10 years isn’t unrealistic. But the master does return. Verse 19 reads, “After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them.” The conversation is identical for the first two slaves. “Master, you gave me **so** many talents; see, I have made the **same number** more.” The master responds the same way to both of them, “Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.”

Don’t miss the language of the master? Just like someone with such power, even as the slave has done exceedingly well, the language of the master keeps the slave in their place. “Well done **slave**. I will continue to control you, but I’ll give you more things to care for. Enter in to the joy of your **master**.” Their success does not earn them independence outside of the master’s control.

These two slaves went against all better judgment. They took very large sums of money and risked it all. Their risky endeavors paid off, and they were welcomed in great appreciation by their master.

The third slave has a different encounter.

The third slave, the one entrusted with \$250,000, the one who had safely buried the money in the dirt, who brought back the money as it had been given, says to the master, “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, and I hid your talent in the ground.”

The response of the third slave is to blame the master. Because I knew **YOU** to be a harsh man, I knew what was best for me was to play it safe. He blames his lack of active investment on the master. He *is* blaming the master, but the underlying excuse is that he was afraid because of the way *he viewed* the master.

Many who teach on this text will leave the lesson to be learned on that simple word *fear*. For example, Mark Douglas says in his commentary on the text, “[This text] is about a willingness to resist fear, and like the first two slaves, to behave in risky and trusting ways.”ⁱⁱⁱ John Buchanan says in his commentary, “The great risk of all, it turns out, is not to risk anything ... The greatest risk of all, it turns out, is to play it safe, to live cautiously and prudently.”^{iv}

Don’t get me wrong, I’m not knocking such a message. I too have preached that message before. I think there’s a solid foundation in this text to make the case that fear is no way to live while faithfully stewarding the resources of God. But again, that’s another sermon for another time.

I told you, what caught me this time was the relationship Jesus sets in the parable of master and slave. The first two slaves did not respond as one would expect a slave to respond when entrusted with the master’s wealth. Slaves just don’t risk their lives in the hopes they can turn their master’s \$1.25 million into \$2.5 million. The first two acted as if this master was not the harsh whip-wielding master we know from our own American Slave-trade history.

So I want to look again at the interaction with the third slave. Why does he act differently?

Again, the slave says, “I knew you to be a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed.”

The master responds, “You knew, did you, that I reap where I do not sow, and gather where I did not scatter?” ... Listen for the inflection. Is this response offered as a statement of confirmation, or an inquisitive question, , “You knew, did you?”

See I wonder, what if the master’s response is not one of verification, but one of critique and disgust? “You knew, did you? ... Is that what you thought?”

Perhaps this story, which we often interpret solely about being faithful stewards, has just as much to offer our perception of the master. “Might it be that this is less a warning about the threatening nature of God and more a caution that in too many of our relationships we tell self-fulfilling prophecies?”^v

“Perhaps how we respond to God’s invitation as stewards says less about us and our capability, and more about how we see the master. “When we imagine God primarily as an enforcer of

rules, we get hung up by the legalism of religion. When we visualize God as stern and prone to punishment, we come to believe everything bad in our lives is punishment from God. When we see God as arbitrary and capricious, that's what we experience, a fickle and unsympathetic God who meets our expectations. At the same time, when we see God as loving, we find it easier to love ourselves and others. When we see God as gracious, we lead more grace-filled lives. When we recognize God as forgiving, we live in the joy of receiving and giving forgiveness. What you see in life is way too often just what you get."^{vi}

Usually, I'd preach this text and say Jesus's message is little more than Elsa's – The parable has a message as simple as a Disney song: "Let it Go! Let it Go! Can't hold it back anymore!" In this frame of mind, the message would normally be, "it's time to lose the fear and go make good on the resources God has entrusted into your care."

But in looking twice at this master-slave relationship, I feel like the song goes a different way. It's not simply about better using your resources, it's not about just giving up your financial wealth, it's about completely reframing your perspective of God as your master! The fear of the third slave isn't that he'd lose the money, it was that if he did lose the money, the master would react with great anger. The fear isn't in not being successful, the fear is of the master's response.

In trying to reconcile this slave-master parable, it seems to me that the slaves who saw the master as one who had much delight were far better aligned to be good stewards than the one who saw God as a harsh man. Because here's the thing, we know God to be a loving and gracious God, for God sent Jesus Christ that, amidst our failures, we maybe forgiven and have eternal life. Elsa may still be right – you've got to "Let it Go! Let it Go!" ... but what you're letting go is the guilt you hold on to in the mindset of an angry and vengeful God. For when we are freed from the fear, we can truly live into a life that multiplies the Lord's abundance. For the glory of God, may we let go of the angry white-man God, and embrace a Lord who has joyfully given and celebrates in our faithful response! Amen.

ⁱ Richard W. Swanson. *Provoking the Gospel of Matthew: A Storyteller's Commentary*. The Pilgrim Press: Cleveland, 2007.

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ Mark Douglas. *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary. Year A, Volume 4*. Eds. Barbara Brown Taylor & David L. Bartlett. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011.

^{iv} John M. Buchanan. *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary. Year A, Volume 4*. Eds. Barbara Brown Taylor & David L. Bartlett. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011.

^v David Lose.

^{vi} David Lose. davidlose.net. Retrieved November 15, 2017.