



## **Giving Up Wastefulness**

**Matthew 25:14-30**

Rev. Thomas G. James

Washington Street UMC

November 12, 2023

In these weeks leading up to the holidays, in which it is expected nearly \$1Trillion will be spent on Christmas gifts, we are talking about what it means to give ... or, more importantly, to *Give Up*. Last week, we talked about starting the process of giving up by relinquishing control. Our first focus on giving up is to reclaim the Biblical promise that control and power do not ultimately lie in our wealth. The Biblical promise, witnessed in the life and ministry of Jesus, proclaims that power and authority belong solely to God.

After we have given up control, the next step is to give up wastefulness.

When we talk about wastefulness in America, it usually centers around the 3 Rs: Reduce, Reuse, and Recycle. For example, one of our biggest generators of waste is single-use plastics. It's estimated that over 40 million tons of plastic was generated in the US in 2022, and over 400 million tons around the globe. Of that, almost 50% was made for single-use purposes. Greenpeace, an environmentalist organization, estimates that only 5-10% of those single-use plastics were recycled, so even with conservative estimates, over 150 million tons of single-use plastics went unrecycled last year.

And that's just plastics – it doesn't touch on our waste of other recyclable products, such as paper, glass, or recyclable metals. In regards the 3 Rs, we have a lot of work to do to address wastefulness. And, should one dive into the scriptures, you would find *plenty* of Biblical texts that address the issue of creation care and the stewardship of the earth. It would not be hard to preach an entire month just on environmentalism. And, given the stats on plastic alone, it's clear such a series would be warranted.

But that's not today's sermon. Our scripture today is not addressing wastefulness from the perspective of creation care.

To help us claim a faithful reading of this text in Matthew 25 and its focus on wastefulness, I want to retell the story. But first, let's set the scene.

If we back up to Matthew 24, we find that Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives. The disciples came to him in private and asked him, "What will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?" Jesus' response is offered using multiple short stories or parables. Each story builds upon the last as Jesus answers the disciples, explaining how they might know that the end of the age has arrived.

By the time we get to Matthew 25, Jesus is to the part of the story where he is defining the kingdom of heaven. Matthew 25, verse 1, begins, "Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this ..." The story immediately following this introduction is that of the Ten Bridesmaids, some of which did not have

enough oil in their lamps to welcome the bridegroom when it was time to enter into the wedding banquet. Today's text, often called the Parable of the Talents, follows the story of the bridesmaids.

Jesus does not give the same distinct introduction to the Parable of the Talents as he does for the story of the bridesmaids. He opens the story with the phrase, "For it as if a man, going on a journey ..." We're clearly not talking about the bridegroom or the wedding banquet anymore. And yet, since there is no new purpose named for this new parable, we're led to believe the story will continue on the same theme; this parable will continue to help us understand what the kingdom of God is like.

We should also remember that Jesus is telling this story while gathered privately with the disciples on the Mount of Olives. The disciples, those to whom this story is told, are Jews. More specifically, they are Jews from the region of Galilee. The disciples were part of an agricultural society with very specific customs regarding land ownership and with very particular customs around slave ownership and the expectations of servants who worked the fields. Most of those customs and understandings are lost in our modern-day experience. So, while it may be impossible to capture all of the nuances of the story, I want to retell the story using some of our modern proclivities.

*The kingdom of heaven will be like this:* It is as if Michael Bloomberg, going on an international safari, summoned his butler, chauffeur, and personal chef, who all resided in the guest house on his property, and entrusted his property to them. To one he gave \$600,000, to another, \$1.2 million, and to the third, \$3 million, to each according to their ability.

The one who had received the \$3 million went off at once and traded with it, and made \$3 million more! In the same way, the one who had received the \$1.2 million made \$1.2 million more. But the staff who had received \$600,000 went off and put the money in a 0% interest personal checking account.

After a long time – long enough that the SEC didn't open an investigation into how these staff had doubled this amount of money through the trading of stocks – Bloomberg came home to settle the accounts with his staff.

The one who had received \$3 million came forward bringing the \$3 million more, saying, "Mr. Bloomberg, you gave me 3, and see, I have made 3 more." Bloomberg replied, "well done, good and faithful staff; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your employer." ... The second staff member came forward, saying, "Mr. Bloomberg, you gave me \$1.2 million, and see, I have made \$1.2 million more." And Bloomberg again said, "Well done, good and trustworthy staff; you have been trustworthy in a few things. I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your employer."

But then the third staff member came forward, the one who had received \$600,000, saying, "Mr. Bloomberg, I knew that you were a harsh boss, building businesses on land that wasn't yours, and reaping the benefits of businesses you didn't even own. So I was afraid, and I put your money in a no-return checking account. Here is your \$600,000 back."

But Bloomberg replied, “You worthless and lazy employee. You knew, did you, that I built businesses on land I did not own, and that I took from businesses that weren’t mine. Then you should have at least put my money into a Money Market account so I would have gotten a 1/2% back in interest. ... Take the money from this one and give it to the one who doubled the \$3 million. For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. As for this staff, who didn’t have the sense to invest my wealth, he’s fired. Get him off of my property.”

...

When we contextualize the story, we hear it differently. The names have been changed, but the details are pretty much the same. A talent was a significant amount of money – worth roughly 20 years of labor wages. I might be generous in estimating that at \$600,000, but it would be close. And though the master in the story is unnamed, for them to entrust 8 talents to their slaves, they would have had to be quite wealthy.

It is not uncommon for us to read parables as if they are allegorical stories relating directly to God. It is not uncommon for us to hear this story and assume that the master is Jesus, the slaves are us (churched people), the departure of the master is Jesus’ ascension, the return of the master is the final coming of Christ, the joy of the master where the first two slaves were welcomed is heaven, and the outer darkness where the third slave was sent is hell. There are many places in the Gospel narrative where the text is written using the literary style of allegory, and we can make these connections. But what if this isn’t one of those places?

What if Michael Bloomberg, or the many other bajillionaires we can think of in our modern society, aren’t the stand in or model for Jesus? What might we learn about the kingdom of heaven if we let Bloomberg be Bloomberg, and the butler be the butler, and the outer darkness be the literal outer darkness - the streets on which the staff was forced to live after being thrown off the property and evicted from the guest house?

What if God isn’t an angry master, vengefully punishing his slaves because of their fear of how God might treat them if they squandered what wealth had been entrusted to them?

I know, that’s a lot of “what ifs.” But seriously, *what if?!*

Let’s look again at some of the details Jesus provides and consider what other message he might be offering the disciples through this parable.

One of the first things we hear is that each of the three slaves is given a large sum of money, money that belonged to the master. The master is not giving up ownership of the money. It still belongs to the master, but he is entrusting it into the care of his slaves while he goes on a journey. We should immediately recognize that the master has a certain level of trust with these slaves. That the master left the property for an extended period of time and left his liquid assets in the hands of his slaves is a pretty radical statement about the relationship between the master and the slaves.

Secondly, we are told that each of the three slaves is given a specific sum of money “according to his ability.” We should appreciate that the master knew the slaves well enough to know which could be entrusted to handle the different sums of money. The master trusts them each to make good use of a portion of his wealth, and that trust is built upon knowing them well enough to know how much wealth each could handle in his absence.

Upon the master’s return, the first two came forward, offering that they had doubled the portion of the master’s wealth with which they had been entrusted. In response to both, the master calls them “good and trustworthy.” Notice, the response to each of the first two slaves is the same. It doesn’t matter that the first returned \$3 million and the second returned \$1.2 million; it doesn’t matter that the amount of the return is greater or lesser. What matters is that they lived up to the trust the master had put into them.

But the third slave responds quite differently. The third says, “I knew you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed, so I was afraid.” One must wonder, did he *really* know the master?

Listen again to the master’s criticism upon learning the third buried his money in the ground out of fear. The master asks him the question, “You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather when I did not scatter?” ... The question is not posed as a statement of fact, but as a hypothetical “gotcha” question. ... “Is that really what you *think* about me? Is that what you *know* about me?” ... He continues, and the first part is not spoken, but implied, “If you knew these things about me, then you should have at least invested my money with the bankers so I would have received interest in return.”

But we should wonder, did the third slave *really* know the master? Rev. Robert McClellan says in his commentary on this text, if the third slave *really* knew the master, “he would have surely recognized the master’s true character in trusting him with talents.”<sup>i</sup>

In our modern vernacular, and because of our own national history, it’s not hard for us to imagine that a slave would have experienced the worst of the master, such as the third seems to describe. Perhaps we even choose to side with the slave in his fear of the master’s retribution, imagining what might have happened had the money gone missing. And yet, the scripture doesn’t tell us the back story. We don’t know how the master had treated these three in past, we only know that he left his property for an extended period of time while entrusting these three with a *great* amount of his wealth. So, at least for now, let us suspend questioning what we are not told to focus on what Jesus does offer in the story.

The story is about the kingdom of God, which is the perfect fulfillment of God’s will for creation – for us, God’s created humanity.

In that kingdom, the parable seems to say, it matters not the amount of return that we offer using the resources over which we have been entrusted. “Jesus’ disciples are not called to do great things, although great things may happen. Rather, Jesus’s disciples are called to do the work that Jesus has given us to do.”<sup>ii</sup> Yet, we are called to reciprocate the trust that God has placed in us, understanding

that the resources we have are ultimately not our own, but God's, and we should use them for the purpose of building up God's kingdom. This is what the kingdom of God is like, where the use of the gifts we have been entrusted aligns with the will of the one who has entrusted them to us.

And so we should ask, will we respond in trust and use those resources for the betterment of God's will, to be part of the work of the kingdom, or will we *waste* that opportunity?

There are many possible ways we can interpret and read this parable. In the framework of Christ's teaching here in Matthew 25, and in the knowledge that God gifts us – providing us with all kinds of talent, wealth, knowledge and experience – it feels like a faithful reading to hear Christ calling us to give us wastefulness. Do not let your fear of the what ifs get in your way of sharing in the kingdom work to which you have been called. Let us trust in the Lord who leads us, who empowers us, and who trusts us by gifting us to share in the work of the kingdom. May we receive that invitation in joy, and take part in the good work of God, that everyone might know God's love. Amen.

---

<sup>i</sup> Robert M. McClellan. *Feasting on the Gospels: Matthew, Volume 2*. Eds. Cynthia A. Jarvis and E. Elizabeth Johnson. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013.

<sup>ii</sup> Stanley Hauerwas. *Matthew: Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible*. Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2015.