

Pentecost XXV: Mt. 25:14-30: The Parable of the Talents

1. The parable of the Pounds, Lk. 19:12-27, is similar to this parable. But the differences are as great as the similarities. Form and redaction critics in our day claim that either the Christian Community or Luke (or whoever wrote Luke, they say) rewrote or redacted the parable of the talents for a theological purpose. Of necessity this denies the historicity of Jesus' speaking Lk. 19:12-27. But these two parables clearly differ as to audience, time, locale, occasion and substance. For details see Arndt's *Commentary on Luke*, p. 394. The simple truth is that Jesus spoke two parables on two different occasions in two different settings for two different purposes. Like any good teacher Jesus used the same illustrations again and again in His teaching.
2. The parable divides itself into three sections: (1) Vss. 14-18: The talents are entrusted; (2) Vss. 19-23: The accounting of the good servants; (3) Vss. 24-30: The accounting of the lazy servant. The first two sections each contain five vss. But the third has seven vss. This alerts us to the fact that this parable is primarily an instance of what we call the second use of the Law. Again and again in the *Book of Concord* this use of the Law is summarized with the words: *Lex semper accusat*, which means, The Law constantly convicts (us). The parable is meant for serious self-examination.
3. Vss. 14-18: The Talents are Entrusted:
Ὡσπερ (just as) requires a corresponding οὕτως (so). But here we have an abbreviated expression. The γάρ indicates that the entire parable explains vs. 13 of the previous parable. The parable is really about constant, responsible watchfulness. The KJV and NKJV rightly translate: "For the kingdom of heaven is like" etc. The ὡσπερ of this vs. goes back to the ὁμοιωθήσεται of vs. 1. ἀποδημῶν means "about to leave on a journey". This participle is a variety of what we call attendant circumstance. παρέδωκεν here means "entrusted". This vs. pictures Jesus entrusting the work of the Kingdom of grace to the Church when He ascended into heaven. Vs. 15 pictures the assigning of individual gifts to individual persons. Note the repeated ὃ μὲν, ὃ δὲ, ὃ δὲ. Note Rom. 12:3,6 in the Nestle margin. The parable is speaking about the visible Christian Church. On the word τάλαντον Fahling says: "Since one talent was worth six thousand denarii, it covered a day's payroll for an army of six thousand men, a denarius being the equivalent of a day's wages for a laborer or a servant." Hendriksen similarly: "An attic talent amounted to no less than six thousand denars. It would take an ordinary laborer almost twenty years to earn one." And a footnote in the RSV: "This talent was more than fifteen years' wages of a laborer." The talent was a very large sum of money. The spiritual, mental, physical and psychological gifts which God apportions to the individual Christian are priceless and precious. The κατὰ phrase is adverbial, denoting correspondence. Here δύνανται means "ability". Our Lord gives no one more than he can handle nor less than his ability requires. The distribution is truly manifold. One observes this everywhere in the Church. And one is amazed to find great and exceptional gifts even in small towns and so-called backward areas. The verb ἀπεδήμησεν indicates Jesus' ascending into heaven. Note the significance of the words εὐθέως πορευθεῖς. He wasted no time. It's like the disciples returning from the Mt. of Ascension, busying themselves with the Lord's work. ἐν αὐτοῖς is adverbial, denoting means or instrument. They put their gifts to work. And they gained one hundred percent. The ὡσαύτως of vs. 17 means that the second man acted just as did the first man. He also gained one hundred percent. But the difference between the first and second reminds us of the principle laid down in I Cor. 12:11: "But one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually as He wills." (NKJV). I have gifts which others may not have. They may have gifts which I do not have. And the amount may differ too. God does not expect me to work beyond my own capabilities. But he does expect me to listen to the words: "Be faithful until death." Rev. 2:10 NKJV. The δὲ of vs. 18 is clearly "but". The contrast is a sharp one. λαβῶν is a substantive participle and ἀπελθὼν is circumstantial sequential.

Now the talent is called "money". τοῦ κυρίου meaning "master", is gen. of possession. αὐτοῦ is gen. of relation. People bury things which they wish to hide or consider dead. At this point Lenski comments: "The talents gained are the graces and the gifts found in others whom we win for the church and whom we help forward in their Christian life. There is a constant extension and multiplication of gifts in the church, talent producing talent." The work which is done by the talents which God gives Christians is as wonderful as the multiplication of the loaves and fish in the hands of Jesus when He fed the 5,000. But on the third man Lenski comments: "This slave regarded the gift as something he did not desire; it aroused no response in his heart." True. He despised the gift. How awful!

4. Vss. 19-23: The Accounting of the Good Servants:

μετὰ πολλῶν χρόνον is adverbial denoting time. In application this denotes the time between the Ascension and the Parousia or death. Modern translations render the following words with "the Master of those slaves (servants)." συναρῆν λόγον means "to settle accounts." προσελθὼν in vs. 20 is circumstantial sequential. λαβὼν is a substantive participle. What he offers the Master is twice as much as he received. λέγων denotes attendant circumstance. Note the order of words in what he says: "Master, five talents to me you have entrusted. Look! Five other talents I've gained." This same joyful exuberance is found again in vs. 22 but is conspicuously absent in vss. 24-25. Fahling comments: "'Behold!' as if inviting him to count the money." Lenski rightly calls attention to I Thess. 2:19 at this point. There Paul says: "For what is our hope, or joy, or crown of rejoicing? Is it not even you in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ at His coming?" (NKJV) Yes. The day of accounting for the faithful child of God will be a day of joy and rejoicing. Now the Master's response in vs. 21. Εὖ means "well done!" The vocative δοῦλε ἀγαθὲ καὶ πιστέ needs comment. We suggest that the καὶ is exegetical: "good, namely faithful". In what sense is a Christian good? Not morally, because both the OT and the NT say that man is not good. Cf. Ps. 14:1-3 and Rom 3:10-12. No man is good but only God is good. Mt. 19:17. Even Christians must confess that in their flesh dwells no good thing. Rom 7:18. In Scripture only the works of Christians are called good, Eph. 2:10, not their persons. They are righteous but only by imputation. Therefore we suggest that καὶ in vss. 21 and 23 means "namely". The Bible does not require goodness of me. Christ is my goodness. But, the Bible does require me to be faithful. Rev. 2:10; I Cor. 4:2. The first ἐπὶ phrase goes back to the life of the Christian. The second ἐπὶ phrase covers eternity. The contrast reminds one of Rom 8:18 and Php. 1:23. Kretzmann remarks: "The master was highly pleased, not so much at the sum of money gained as at the faithful work of the servant." And Fahling: "It is not the money that is stressed, but faithfulness." On this section Lenski comments: "'After a long time' seems almost like a hint to the Twelve that the Parousia would not come as soon as they might expect. . . . But this long time surely implies two things: the delay thoroughly tests out the faithful, and at the same time it gives the unfaithful a long period to repent and to amend." And now the final word: "Enter into the joy of your Lord." Modern translations render κύριος here with "Master" and that is correct for it is still part of the parable. But the translations of this command are interesting: AAT: "Come and be happy with your master." NIV: "Come and share your master's happiness." Lenski on this vs.: "The slave is rewarded beyond all deserts. . . . Jesus holds up this commendation to us in advance in order that we may ever keep it before our eyes and allow it to make us always faithful. . . . All these talents are only 'few things' just enough to try us out to see what kind of slaves we are. What then will the 'many things' be? They are here veiled by their multitude and their richness, partly because the imagery of the parable is so restricted, and partly also because our poor earthly minds cannot reach up to these coming heavenly glories. But here all the Lord's goodness and his grace appear; his one thought is our elevation and our joy." On the command at the end of vs. 21 Kretzmann says: "And he was to share in the returns of his labors by becoming, in a way, the partner of the master, and enjoying the fruits of wider usefulness." And Fahling: "With this expression the Savior directs the

carnal minded disciples to heavenly things." Beautifully said. In difficult days these words are a great comfort to the beleaguered Christian. And in days when he is tempted by the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes and the pride of life, these words remind him of what is most important. Vss. 22-23 are very similar to vss. 20-21. They have much in common. But note well that the commendation and reward are the very same in both cases. If by the grace of God I am faithful to Him I can confidently rest in the thought that I will share His joy with Him forever. What more do I need? I do not have the same kind of gifts or the same amount of gifts as do other Christians. But, oh Lord, let me feel neither superior nor inferior toward anyone! Let me be faithful to the point of death.

5. Vss. 24-30: The Accounting of the Lazy Servant:

In form vss. 20, 22, and 24 begin in the same way. The initial καὶ in 22 and 24 means "also". εἰληφῶς is a substantival participle. It differs none in meaning from the aorist λαβὼν in vs. 20. (Note that λαβὼν is elliptical in vs. 22, unless we follow the reading in Sinaiticus and the Western Text.) What the lazy servant says is well-nigh a speech as opposed to what the others say. What he says is not a joyful offering but rather a lengthy excuse. TEV and JB render κόριε with "sir". AAT and JB distinguish between ἔγνω in this vs. and ἤδειξ in vs. 26. AAT has "I found out" for the former and "you knew" for the latter. JB reads "I had heard" and "you knew". That is a good observation. ἔγνω does not denote what he knew on his own but rather what he knew by hearsay. Here it denotes lack of conviction and, in application, lack of faith. All our versions consistently render σκληρὸς with "hard". It is explained by the two participles θερτίζων and συνάγων. Fahling understands σκληρὸς as "hard to please". Lenski says: "hard in a moral sense, is set absolutely on obtaining his own advantage." Hendriksen offers a number of synonyms: "unrelenting, harsh, merciless, stern, one who exacts more than he has a right to exact." Tasker quotes McNeile: "a hard moneymaking Jew who enriched himself at the cost of others, gathering gain where he had not spent." Of course, what he had learned by hearsay was not true. The καὶ in 25 means "and therefore". φοβηθεὶς is circumstantial causal "because I was afraid". ὄπελθὼν is temporal, sequential. On ἔκρυψα etc. Tasker says: "What he had done was to treat it as a dead thing, which like all dead things was better buried!" Ylvisaker says at this point: "In the parable, he who has received the least buries his treasure, but in our daily experience it is oftentimes they who have received the most. . . . How many there are who vitiate and destroy the glorious gifts with which they are endowed of God." Kretzmann: "He tried to put the blame upon the master. He believed the master to be hard, avaricious, grasping, ungenerous, with no love and reward for his servants, who were forced to slave and toil unremittingly to increase his gains, without receiving any share in the harvest which their hands produced." What he finally says to his master is in keeping with his estimate of his master. AAT reads: "There's your money!" NEB has: "Here it is--you have what belongs to you." Ylvisaker says: "But he was given not only to indolence, but also to ill will and animosity. This is evident in his entire speech, particularly in his closing word: 'There thou hast that is thine.'" Hendriksen paraphrases this sentence: "You should be thankful that I kept it intact, and that I now return to you whatever is yours." The lazy servant cannot (and is not allowed to) say more. Just as he had made a lengthy speech, his master answers him in kind. This situation is eschatological. All mercy has ceased. He is addressed with words that are as frightening as were the words to the first two comforting. πονηρὸς means "actively evil". Again an exegetical καὶ. Actively evil in what sense? Lazy. He is not accused of sins of commission but sins of omission, not of evil works but of dead works, not of wrongs committed against God and neighbor but of right things which he failed to do. Note that what follows is in the form of a question: "So you knew, did you, that I harvest" etc. But what he says now proves that the man is lying or, if not that, then at least that he is illogical, cannot think straight. The οὖν of vs. 27 is inferential. It draws a conclusion: "Wasn't it, therefore, necessary that you turn my money over to the bankers and, when I had come, I would have gotten mine with interest?" Tasker: "The master's point is that the servant, believing as he did that it was

true, ought to have been all the more concerned to see that he had something more to bring to him on his return from abroad than the one bag of gold he had received!" Ylvisaker: "When the servant refused to act independently in the work of his calling, he should have subordinated himself to others, and allowed them to take him into their service." Fahling: "What he said in defense of his conduct was preposterous." τραπεζίτης means a person who is both a moneychanger and one who lends money out at interest. Hendriksen correctly observes: "A safe inference would seem to be that Jesus is not opposed to responsible capitalism." On the word τόκος Tasker says: "The Greek word τόκος means 'offspring'. Interest is the 'child' of capital." In other words, this man's activity was fruitless. Faith without works is dead. Another οὖν in vs. 28 meaning: "in view of your attitudes." The point of vs. 28 is the loss of everything. His works do not follow him. He will not hear the words "Well done!" The γὰρ of vs. 29 is explanatory. Jesus repeats a principle which is found several times in the Gospels. Consult the passages at Mt. 13:12. The first half of the axiom denotes God's gracious blessedness on the attitudes and actions of the faithful believers. But the second half denotes God's awful curse on the attitudes and omissions of the fearful, lying, lazy, faithless unbelievers. But more. In vs. 30 he is called "useless". The words are obviously addressed to the angels: "Throw him out into the outer darkness." Not just darkness but outer darkness. The place where all mercy has ceased. The final sentence beginning with ἐκεῖ denotes the place of remorse, regret and despair. That place is everlasting damnation. What a text for self-examination! Lord, is it I? For Jesus' sake forgive my fears, my lies, my uselessness.