

Five Talents Worth of Stock in Edsel

The Scripture text this morning is one of three kingdom parables in Matthew 25: The Parable of the Bridesmaids, The Parable of the Talents, and The Parable of the Sheep and goats. We'll get to know the Parable of the Talents pretty well over the next few weeks. I have eight sermons planned on the parable.

(MATTHEW 25:14-30 NRSV) *“For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his servants and entrusted his property to them; ¹⁵ to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. ¹⁶ The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. ¹⁷ In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. ¹⁸ But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master’s money. ¹⁹ After a long time the master of those servants came and settled accounts with them. ²⁰ Then the one who received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, ‘Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents.’ ²¹ His master said to him, ‘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 master.’ ²² And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, ‘Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents.’ ²³ His master said to him, ‘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 master.’ ²⁴ Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, ‘Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; ²⁵ so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.’ ²⁶ But his master replied, ‘You wicked and lazy servant! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? ²⁷ Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. ²⁸ So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. ²⁹ 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. ³⁰ As for this worthless servant, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’*

If this parable were made into a movie, which role would you play? With which character do you most closely identify: the one with five talents? the one with two? one? the master? Or maybe you don't connect at all; you're a neighbor, watching the whole thing over the back fence.

A couple of questions came to mind. First, why did that last guy get only one talent? I know the text says, "...each according to his ability," but I think I'd have felt "slighted." I generally have the outlook about myself that I can handle about as much as the next guy, in most things. I'd have wondered, "Does the Master think I can't handle it? Does he think I'm incompetent? Doesn't he trust me? Does he have favorites? I think I'd've had a burr under my saddle!

And another question: "What if any one of those servants had lost what the Master gave him? "Master, you entrusted me with five talents. I bought five talents worth of stock in Edsel; I lost my shirt—and your money. I return empty-handed."

Now, for you young 'whipper-snappers' in the crowd, the Edsel was a car developed in the late 50's by Ford. It was supposed to revolutionize the automobile

industry; it was to be a technological marvel; the proto-typical car of the future, and General Motors and Chrysler would be scurrying around for years, trying to catch up with Ford. The car flopped miserably, and Ford—and everybody who invested in Edsel—lost a bundle! What if one of the Master's servants had invested in something like Edsel, and lost his shirt?

Not every speculative investment pays off! In fact, in today's economy, there aren't many secure investments! How can we make this parable relevant to today's circumstances, when the economy is so bad, and two out of three men in this story doubled their investments? Can you imagine the risks they took?

You know, I'll bet that's what was going on in the mind of that third servant—the one who buried the money: "What if I lose it?" I guess that puts me in the category of the one-talent guy. How about you?

When Jo Lynn and I first got married she worked as a file clerk at an insurance company in downtown Dallas. Her boss was a junior executive who felt he needed a secretary. He occasionally dictated correspondence to Jo Lynn and had her doing other secretarial work; but when he requested she receive secretarial pay, it was always denied.

His wife was an executive secretary at Texas Instruments. She had information that TI was about to sign a huge contract with NASA, and the stock was going to go through the roof (this was before "insider trading" was illegal).

Since her boss was unable to secure secretarial income for Jo Lynn, he offered her 500 shares of stock in Texas Instruments—\$1 per share. Now, this was in 1964, and \$500 was a lot of money! Jo Lynn was making \$300/month and I was a part-time barber, going to school and making about \$250/month.

Her boss told her he'd loan her the money, and she could pay it back any way she could. But I was afraid, and wouldn't let her do it.

The deal went down, and we watched the stock for several months. It went overnight from \$1/share to \$5/share, and in two weeks it had worked its way up to \$9/share. Then, it split, and grew to about \$15/share and split again... The last time we checked that \$500 investment would have been worth a little over \$30K!!! In 1964, that was five years' income for us!

So I identify closely with the one-talent guy! In the parable, he discounted his one, lonely talent, and buried it. You see, he had adopted the same risk-less kind of life-style so many of us have adopted: in our business dealings, our political thinking; our social relationships; and especially in the practice of our religious faith. It's the kind of no-risk life-style that says, "You can't lose any money if you don't place any bets!" "You can't fall out of bed if you sleep on the floor."

But there's another approach. I truly believe, based on my understanding of Jesus' whole life and ministry and teaching, that had either of the servants returned saying, "I invested my talents in Edsel stock and lost my shirt," the reply would have been, "Well, at least you've got guts. I'll give you a scholarship to Harvard. You go and earn a degree in business and investments—match that courage with some skill and knowledge. Then come back. We'll try it again."

In the parable, the amount was irrelevant. The point is simply that one servant did nothing with what he had. You see, this isn't a parable about succeeding or

failing. It's a parable about the Kingdom of Heaven. And if the New Testament teaches anything it teaches that the Kingdom of Heaven is not built on the success or failure of its citizens.

This is a story about faith. It's about two servants who trusted their Master's grace. Oh, there were rumors: the Master had a reputation for 'reaping where he'd not sown'. But two servants trusted the master, anyway; trusted him enough to use what he gave them.

And, while the parable is not about succeeding or failing, I think it is significant in the parable that NO EFFORT ON BEHALF OF THE MASTER FAILED.

The prophet, Isaiah, wrote:

As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, ¹¹so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it. (ISAIAH 55:10-11 NIV)

Do you believe that? Do you believe it enough to dig up that talent—that gift—that responsibility—God entrusted to your care, that you buried years ago? The five-talent people and the two-talent people are doing their part. It's not quite enough, is it? There are just too few of them, and we're gradually losing ground. Never before has the church—never before has this congregation—needed one-talent people (and that's most of us) more than now.

Here's what I propose: the traditional summer church slump begins next week; and here's a little fun project to keep us involved and interested—and to remind us that God is faithful; and that no effort on behalf of God fails. When you leave here in a few minutes, each of you will be given one talent. Oh, you won't have any trouble recognizing it; it will look an awful lot like a dollar bill. You will be "entrusted" with one talent. That will be my investment in you.

On July 29 or August 5 (exact date TBA) we'll have fellowship dinner. At that fellowship dinner we'll have a time of accounting. How will you handle your talent? Will you double it—or more? Or will you bury it?

It's just a dollar? Well, I have done this at least once in every church I've served since Claremore, Oklahoma, in the 70s. In every case, there were initial doubters [*and some always choose not to participate. That's OK.*]; but, in every case it's been a lot of fun, and the initial investment has been increased many times over. We'll designate the money to some special project in the church—the Youth Fund or Building Fund—or some Mission Project. You'll decide at our next congregational business meeting.

Let me share how some have dealt with their "talent." One man added a few dollars of his own and went to a junk store and bought an old lawn mower for six or seven dollars. He rebuilt the carburetor and replaced the head gasket. With parts included, he had eleven or twelve dollars invested in the mower, in addition to the one "talent" he had received at church. He sold the lawn mower for \$75.00, and with the \$75.00 he bought several more old lawn mowers and rebuilt them. He turned in almost \$500.

One man added money from his pocket and bought step-down filters. He quit
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smoking and upped his regular church pledge by the amount he would have spent on cigarettes for the rest of the year. That was in 1978, and amounted to \$300.00.

There are those who have done arts and crafts and got together and held a craft fair. Some teamed up and pooled their resources. Some have auctioned off services: a thirty-minute airplane flight; a sunset dinner cruise on a sailboat or party barge; Jo Lynn and I sold tickets to a hamburger feast in our back yard.

Let your imagination go. Have fun with it. Team up with your friends. Make posters to advertise. Multiply your talent; and when we get together July 29 or August 5, perhaps we can say to everyone: "Well done, good and faithful servant!"