

IDENTIFYING THE TALENTS
CONTEXTUAL CLUES FOR THE INTERPRETATION OF THE
PARABLE OF THE TALENTS (MATTHEW 25:14-30)

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Summary

The parable of the Talents contains some elements that were intended to be interpreted allegorically. The master represents the Son of Man; the servants represent the disciples. But what about the talents? Some say the talents represent gifts and abilities; others, that they do not represent anything specific but are necessary only to demonstrate faithful stewardship. However, this article proposes that Matthew did have a specific referent in mind. By means of an extended verbal repetition (Matt. 13:12 and 25:29) Matthew intended the talents to refer to 'the knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven'. In other words, the disciples have been given inside information about the kingdom – they were given the interpretation of Jesus' parables unlike the crowds who only heard the parables – and therefore they must make use of this knowledge to bring about a profit for Jesus. Those who do will be rewarded; failure to do so will result in punishment. Furthermore, this applies just as much to the readers of Matthew's gospel. Support for this view is found in 1 Corinthians 4:1-5.

1. Introduction

In the history of Christian scholarship, apart from the occasional dissenting voice,¹ the interpretation of the parable of the Talents has

¹ Two such dissenting voices were the subject of the author's masters thesis, *A Critique of Two Recent Interpretations of the Parable of the Talents* (Sydney: Australian College of Theology, 2002); William R. Herzog, II, *Parables as Subversive Speech: Jesus as Pedagogue of the Oppressed* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1994): 150-68, and N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996): 632-39.

been largely a matter of scholarly consensus: it teaches fidelity in what God has entrusted to us. Where disagreement emerges, however, is what precisely the parable is claiming God has entrusted to us. In other words, what do the talents represent? The most common answer is that the talents refer to gifts and abilities. However, it is the contention of this article that this is not what Matthew intended when he included this parable of Jesus in his gospel.

2. The Presence of Allegory

It is widely recognised today that Jesus' parables contain elements that were intended to be interpreted allegorically. This does not mean that they are allegories in the full sense such that all characters and events, right down to the tiniest detail, have equivalents in the real world. Rather, there are only a limited number of allegorical connections. The issue for the interpreter is, of course, which ones can be made legitimately.

The parable of the Talents in Matthew 25:14-30 describes a wealthy man who, before going on a journey, entrusts money to his three servants who then split into two groups according to their contrasting behaviour: the first two servants double the money entrusted to them whilst the third buries the money thus avoiding loss but also missing out on making any increase. When the wealthy man returns, and the servants are summoned to settle their accounts, the first two are rewarded and the third is punished.

To whom does the wealthy man refer? If rabbinic parables are any indication, Matthew's readers could well understand the wealthy man as referring to God. One of the important features of the early Jewish parables is that in almost every parable that involves an authority figure, whether this be a king, a master, a father, or even a man, that figure represents God.² Looking to rabbinic parables for interpretive clues must be done with caution, however. As John W. Sider notes: 'Rabbinic parables may also illuminate the expectations of Jesus'

² Craig A. Evans, 'Parables in Early Judaism' in *The Challenge of Jesus' Parables* (ed. Richard N. Longenecker; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000): 67: 'There are some 325 extant Tannaic parables, more than half of which feature a king, who almost always represents God.'

audience, even though none of the extant examples can be dated as early as the time of his ministry.³ As such, at best they can be seen to be part of the common religious milieu.⁴ However, this does not necessarily mean that the master in the parable of the Talents also refers to God. Given the context in which Matthew has placed this parable, that is, in a section dealing with the unexpected coming of the Son of Man, following on directly after the parable of the Ten Virgins in which the central authority figure, the bridegroom, referred to the Son of Man⁵, and immediately preceding an account of the Son of Man performing the final judgement, the wealthy man far more likely refers to the Son of Man as well, certainly as far as Matthew is concerned. After all, Judaism with its strict monotheism only had one main authority figure. Early Christianity, whilst not abandoning monotheism, had two possibilities to choose from: God the Father and Jesus Christ the Lord or Master.

Once this identification has been made the two groups of subordinates exhibiting contrasting behaviour – the two faithful servants and the one wicked servant – quite naturally refer to Jesus' disciples,⁶ just as did the wise and foolish virgins in the preceding parable. After all, as Matthew 24:3 makes clear, Jesus in his Mount of Olives discourse is speaking to his disciples not the crowds. It makes sense that the parables included here are directly relevant to this audience.

³ John W. Sider, *Interpreting the Parables: A Hermeneutical Guide to Their Meaning* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995): 207.

⁴ Brad H. Young, *Jesus and His Jewish Parables: Rediscovering the Roots of Jesus' Teaching* (New York: Paulist, 1989): 37: 'The parables of Jesus, like those of Israel's sages, are derived from the common environment of the rabbinical world of instruction.'

⁵ A careful reader of Matthew's gospel will have no difficulty in identifying the bridegroom of Matt. 25:1 with Jesus, since this concept has been introduced in Matt. 9:15, see W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew* (ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988): III.395.

⁶ Cf. Matt. 20:26; Luke 16:13; 17:10; John 13:16; 15:15, 20. See also Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew Vol. 2: The Churchbook (Matthew 13–28)* (Dallas: Word, 1990): 902: 'the word "servants" reminds us for a third time in three parables that we are dealing with believers, not unbelievers.'

3. Identifying The Talents

In the history of interpretation scholars provide a more or less explicit identification of what the talents represent depending on their preference for allegory. However, even those commentators who explicitly deny allegory end up making some form of allegorical association for the talents. For example, Adolf Jülicher, the driving force behind the move to limit the presence of allegory in Jesus' parables, makes no less than *three* allegorical connections when he says that the parable of the talents teaches 'fidelity in all that God has entrusted to us.'⁷

A talent was a measure of weight varying in size from about 26 to 36 kilograms. This became a unit of coinage in that it referred to a certain amount of a metal, either gold, silver or copper. While this value differed at various times and in various places, it was always comparatively high. As a unit of currency it only appears elsewhere in the New Testament in the parable of the Unforgiving Servant (Matt. 18:23-34) where the 10,000 talents that the servant owes the king is a huge monetary debt, impossible to repay. However, in the parable of the Talents the servants are given five, two and one talents respectively. These are still very large sums of money which would have provided the servants with great opportunities for investment.

As far as the underlying significance of the talents is concerned, since the talents are distributed unequally according to ability many scholars conclude that they probably symbolise personal gifts and abilities to be used in the service of the Son of Man. For Chrysostom, the talents represent 'each person's ability, whether in the way of protection, or in money, or in teaching, or whatever.'⁸ Similarly, for Calvin the talents are the gifts of God, especially the gifts of the Holy Spirit.⁹ More recently, Craig L. Blomberg identifies the talents as a portion of God's resources;¹⁰ I. H. Jones, whatever endowment a Christian may have received, although gifts of 'hearing' and

⁷ Adolf Jülicher, *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu, Band 2: Auslegung der Gleichnisreden der drei ersten Evangelien* (Freiburg i. Br.: Mohr, 1899): 481: 'auf Treue in allem, was Gott uns anvertraut hat'. The allegorical connections Jülicher makes are, of course, the Master = God, the servants = us, and the talents = what has been entrusted.

⁸ Homily LXXVIII in St. John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Matthew* in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* Vol. 10 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978): 472.

⁹ John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists: Matthew, Mark, and Luke* Vol. 3 (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1846): 444.

¹⁰ Craig L. Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables* (Leicester: Apollos, 1990): 214.

‘understanding’ are emphasised;¹¹ and Brad H. Young, everything that a person has whether it be goods or abilities.¹²

However, this may be unduly influenced by the meaning of the word ‘talent’ in English¹³ and a misapplication of verse 29. This verse is often seen as teaching a ‘use it or lose it’ principle which very nicely applies to gifts and abilities. For example, Leon Morris comments:

Anyone who has a talent (using the word in the modern sense) of any kind and fails to use it, by that very fact forfeits it. By contrast, anyone who has a talent and uses it to the full finds that the talent develops and grows. This is a law of the spiritual life, and we neglect it at our peril.¹⁴

However, verse 29 is *not* being used to explain how the first two servants doubled their talents. Rather, it is used to explain the rewarding of the first two servants and the punishing of the third servant. Consequently, we need to see the verse as applying in the context of the eschatological judgement: one’s eschatological reward will merely heighten or make complete that which one has already experienced in part during this life.¹⁵

Furthermore, if one follows this equating of talents with gifts and abilities through the parable the end result is some rather puzzling readings. For example, the first two servants double their ‘talents’; this implies that using one’s gifts and abilities will result in the gaining of *more* gifts and abilities rather than *improving* the gifts and abilities one already has which is the usual understanding. The issue is further clouded by verse 28 where the one talent of the third servant is taken away and given to the first servant. How this could be said to apply to gifts and abilities is not at all clear.

There are also examples of more specific identifications of the talents. For example, Augustine equates the talent with salvation: ‘the

¹¹ Ivor Harold Jones, *The Matthean Parables: A Literary & Historical Commentary* (Leiden: Brill, 1995): 478, 471.

¹² Brad H. Young, *The Parables: Jewish Tradition and Christian Interpretation* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1998): 82.

¹³ ‘Talent’ in the figurative sense of mental endowment or natural ability is derived from this very parable and was first used in this way in English circa 1430, *The Oxford English Dictionary* (2nd Ed.) Vol. 17 (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989): 580. In other words, this figurative sense of the word should *not* be read back into the parable.

¹⁴ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992): 632.

¹⁵ As Craig L. Blomberg says: ‘The principle applies in a preliminary fashion already in this life ... The principle will be applied more consistently in a once-for-all fashion on Judgment Day’ (*Matthew* [NAC 22; Nashville: Broadman, 1992]: 374). See also Jan Lambrecht, *Out of the Treasure: The Parables in the Gospel of Matthew* (Louvain: Peeters, 1991): 231.

wickedness of that servant who was reprobate and severely condemned, was that he would not put out his money to use. He kept the entire sum he had received; but the Lord looked for profit from it. God is covetous with regard to our salvation.’¹⁶ He then applies this practically to preachers (a minister’s preaching is the ‘putting out’ and the congregation’s response of living well is the ‘profit’), Christians in general (conversions that result from defending Christ, answering murmurers, and rebuking blasphemers) and men as the head of their households (by looking after the salvation of all of their household).¹⁷

C. H. Dodd attempted to determine the original setting of each parable in the actual circumstances of Jesus’ ministry. For the Talents, he argued that the parable was directed against the Pharisees. In this context, and despite his avowed avoidance of allegory, the talents take on a more specific meaning. Referring to the third servant, Dodd argues:

I would suggest that he is the type of pious Jew who comes in for so much criticism in the Gospels. He seeks personal security in a meticulous observance of the Law ... The parable, I suggest, was intended to lead such persons to see their conduct in its true light. They are not giving God His own; they are defrauding Him.¹⁸

If Dodd is somewhat vague about equating the talents with the Law, others who have followed his general method are not afraid to be more specific. For Jeremias, the talents represent the Word of God;¹⁹ for Lane C. McGaughey (and Bernard Brandon Scott who has more recently taken McGaughey’s interpretation a little further), the talents represent the Law.²⁰

In contrast to both these approaches, some commentators view the talents as merely part of the details in the parable that do not have any particular referent within the sphere of application. The talents are

¹⁶ Augustine, *Sermons on Selected Lessons of the New Testament in Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* Vol. 6 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979): 405.

¹⁷ Augustine, *Sermons*: 406.

¹⁸ C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (Glasgow: William Collins, 1961): 112.

¹⁹ Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus* (rev. ed; London: SCM, 1963): 61-62.

²⁰ Lane C. McGaughey, ‘The Fear of Yahweh and the Mission of Judaism: A Postexilic Maxim and Its Early Christian Expansion in the Parable of the Talents’ *Journal of Biblical Literature* 94 (1975): 243; Bernard Brandon Scott, *Hear Then the Parable: A Commentary on the Parables of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989): 234.

necessary to demonstrate the faithfulness of the first two servants and the unfaithfulness of the third. As John B. Carpenter says, ‘Parables are about principles, and this parable is about faithfulness of endeavor.’²¹ He goes on to say that the money was used as an example of everything with which we have been endowed by God.²² To identify the talents more specifically, Carpenter claims, is to run the risk of eisegesis.²³ Don Carson agrees:

Attempts to identify the talents with spiritual gifts, the law, natural endowments, the gospel, or whatever else, lead to a narrowing of the parable with which Jesus would have been uncomfortable. Perhaps he chose the talent or mina symbolism because of its capacity for varied application.²⁴

4. A New Proposal

However, this is not necessarily the case. If we were studying the parable as an isolated text then any attempt to more precisely identify the underlying referent of the talents could result in any one of a number of diverse solutions such as those given above. But we should not study the parable in isolation; rather, we must examine it within the context in which it is located, namely Matthew’s gospel. After all, this is not only the earliest source we have of Jesus’ parable, it is also the earliest *interpretation* of the parable that we have.

When one examines the parable of the Talents within the context of Matthew’s gospel one discovers that there are wider contextual clues that point to a more specific referent for the talents. Firstly, many commentators have noted that Matthew has given the parable a highly abbreviated introduction.²⁵ Instead of using an introductory formula,

²¹ John B. Carpenter, ‘The Parable of the Talents in Missionary Perspective: A Call for an Economic Spirituality’ *Missiology* 25 (1997): 167.

²² Carpenter, ‘Missionary Perspective’: 168. This is still an allegorical connection, however. M. Eugene Boring tries to avoid even this by shifting the connection from the noun to the verb: ‘The talent itself does not stand for anything; it is what one does with the entrusted talent that represents the responsible deeds of Christian discipleship’ (‘Matthew’ in *The New Interpreter’s Bible* Vol. 8 [Nashville: Abingdon, 1995]: n. 453).

²³ Carpenter, ‘Missionary Perspective’: 168.

²⁴ D. A. Carson, ‘Matthew’ in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, vol. 8 (ed. Frank E. Gaebelin; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984): 516.

²⁵ For example, Davies & Allison, *Matthew*, 3:404 and Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14–28* (WBC 33B; Dallas: Word Books, 1995): 733.

by means of the word ὅσπερ in verse 14 Matthew very closely associates this parable with the preceding one, the parable of the Ten Virgins. As such, the parable of the Talents is also a parable about the 'kingdom of heaven' (Matt. 25:1).²⁶ This, then, implicitly connects the parable with other kingdom parables, such as those found in Matthew 13.

Secondly, there is an explicit connection with this earlier chapter. In Matthew 13:11-12, Jesus replies to his disciples when they ask why he speaks to the crowds using parables:

'The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them. Whoever has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him.'

In other words, the penultimate verse of the parable of the Talents has a parallel earlier in Matthew's gospel in the context of the giving of the knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven to the disciples. Assuming that Matthew intentionally included this paradoxical statement of Jesus' in two different contexts, we can legitimately ask what he intended by it. It is possible that Matthew's gospel contains two different applications of a more general statement.²⁷ However, it is more likely that this extended verbal repetition is Matthew's way of saying that the two passages are related in some way. M. D. Goulder has examined what he called the doublets of Matthew's gospel.²⁸ He argues that the doublet consisting of Matthew 13:12 and 25:29 is an example of 'Marcan epigrams given in their Marcan contexts and either then or later filled out and repeated.'²⁹ Goulder goes on to say that the parable of the Talents 'expounds' Matthew 13:12.³⁰

²⁶ Morris, *Matthew*: 626–27.

²⁷ This seems to be the approach of the *New Living Translation*: 'To those who are open to my teaching, more understanding will be given, and they will have an abundance of knowledge. But to those who are not listening, even what they have will be taken away from them' (Matt. 13:12); 'To those who use well what they are given, even more will be given, and they will have an abundance. But from those who are unfaithful, even what little they have will be taken away' (25:29). This approach, however, minimises the very close verbal similarities of the original Greek texts.

²⁸ 'The process of midrashic exposition often involves the glossing of one context with another later in the story, so that the author is involved in borrowing forward from his own material' (M. D. Goulder *Midrash and Lection in Matthew* [London: SPCK, 1974]: 36).

²⁹ Goulder, *Midrash*: 37.

³⁰ Goulder, *Midrash*. This approach corresponds with Janice Capel Anderson's sixth function of extended verbal repetitions: 'to unify disparate elements, sometimes creating a background pattern against which other elements can be understood'.

Once the extended verbal repetition has been noticed by the reader other connections become apparent. In Matthew 13 we have Jesus entrusting the knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven to the disciples; in the parable of the Talents we have the master (the Son of Man) entrusting talents to his servants (the disciples). If we complete the parallelism it appears that it was Matthew's intention that the talents be identified with 'the knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven'. This identification is further supported by noting that later in Matthew 13 the kingdom of heaven is likened to a treasure and a pearl of great value (Matt. 13: 44-46); equating the kingdom of heaven with talents – large amounts of money – also fits this pattern.

Only a handful of recent commentators have said something along these lines. For example, R. T. France says

In the context of Jesus' ministry the sums of money entrusted to the slaves are more likely to represent not natural endowments given to men in general, but the specific privileges and opportunities of the kingdom of heaven ... to be faithfully exploited before the master returns.³¹

Similarly, John Paul Heil argues that the talents are 'a rather general and open-ended symbol of all that Jesus has entrusted to his disciples for promoting the reign of the heavens during the time between his resurrection and final coming.'³² He, too, notes that the taking away of the talent recalls Matthew 13:11-12, the fact that the disciples, and not the crowds, have been given inside knowledge by means of parables. The promise of verse 12 is then confirmed and developed in the parable of the Talents: 'The one talent has been taken away from the servant because he did not risk working productively with it to know and experience the mystery of the reign of the heavens'³³.

France is not quite precise enough, but Heil's discussion is excellent although he avoids making the connection between the talents and the phrase 'the knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven' explicit. However, as discussed above, this is what Matthew wants us to do. But what precisely is this knowledge? In the context of

Matthew's Narrative Web: Over, and Over, and Over Again (JSNTSupp 91; JSOT: Sheffield, 1994): 44.

³¹ R. T. France, *Matthew* (TNTC; Leicester: IVP, 1985): 352.

³² John Paul Heil, 'Final Parables in the Eschatological Discourse in Matthew 24-25' in Warren Carter & John Paul Heil *Matthew's Parables: Audience-Oriented Perspectives* (CBQMS 30; Washington, DC: Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1998): 197n.

³³ Heil, 'Final Parables': 199.

Matthew 13 both the crowds and the disciples hear Jesus' parables. But the disciples received the *interpretation* of the parables. Jesus speaks to them *explicitly* about the Kingdom; they have been given what could be described as 'inside information'. This, then, is 'the knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven'.³⁴

We can take this one step further. Matthew's gospel contains not just Jesus' public teachings but also much of what Jesus said privately to his disciples. In other words, anyone who reads Matthew's gospel has *also* been entrusted with the explicit teaching about the Kingdom. When Jesus says to the disciples 'The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to *you*' Matthew means Jesus' words to be directed to the reader also.

5. The Teaching of the Parable

We are finally in a position to discuss the teaching of the parable as a whole by peeling back the allegorical elements so that what is represented is laid bare. Jesus has entrusted the knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven to his disciples. He has given more to some and less to others according to their abilities.³⁵ Some of his disciples go out immediately and 'make increase'. In other words, they make use of the knowledge that has been given to them in a way that brings about a profit for Jesus and they are consequently rewarded. However, some of his disciples sit on that knowledge; they keep it to themselves; they act in a way that does not result in profit for Jesus and they are punished as a result. In fact, they are treated as an outsider; they have revealed by their behaviour that they are not true disciples of Jesus at all.

This interpretation also relates well to the parables on either side. The parable of the Ten Virgins teaches that when the Son of Man returns the disciples must be prepared, and that those who are not will also be treated as outsiders.³⁶ The parable of the Talents then teaches

³⁴ See also the discussion in Craig S. Keener, *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999): 379-81.

³⁵ In other words, as R. T. France notes, 'not everyone has the same opportunities and abilities to achieve results for the kingdom of heaven...' ('On Being Ready [Matthew 25:1-46]' in *The Challenge of Jesus' Parables* [ed. Richard N. Longenecker; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000]: 187.

³⁶ Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*: 195; Heil, 'Final Parables': 195; France, 'On Being Ready': 183.

how Jesus' disciples are to be prepared: they need to have invested what they know about the kingdom and to have made a profit. The parable of the Sheep and the Goats takes this one step further by offering eternal life to those who respond to the disciples as they go out into the world investing their knowledge of the kingdom.³⁷

6. A Surprising Parallel

Interestingly, this particular interpretation of the parable of the Talents finds strong support in 1 Corinthians 4:1-5, where Paul states:

So then, men ought to regard us as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the secret things of God. Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful. I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court; indeed, I do not even judge myself. My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me. Therefore judge nothing before the appointed time; wait till the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men's hearts. At that time each will receive his praise from God.

The conjunction of so many of the same motifs as are found in this particular interpretation of the parable of the Talents – disciples as servants, entrusted with the secret things of God, needing to be faithful with what has been entrusted until Christ returns to judge, then receiving praise – is quite astounding. This is not to suggest that Matthew's parable derives from Paul's letter or even that Paul is alluding to Jesus' original parable. Rather, it demonstrates that these ideas, motifs and allegorical connections were certainly present in the church at that time.

7. Conclusion

Matthew's interpretation of Jesus' parable of the Talents presents the reader of his gospel with a challenge. If one has been entrusted with the knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven – and anyone who has read Matthew's gospel will have been given that very knowledge – then one is expected to put that knowledge to good use.

³⁷ This is following the 'particularist' interpretation of this parable rather than the 'universalist' interpretation. See Graham N. Stanton, *A Gospel for a New People: Studies in Matthew* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1992): 208.

Those who make increase will be praised with the words 'Well done, good and faithful servant! Come and share your master's happiness'. Those who fail to make any increase will be punished with the words 'You wicked and lazy servant!' Matthew's point is clear: it is up to the reader as to which response of the Master they will receive.