

“Talents, Not Talents”

I know of few things in the New Testament that have caused more confusion than the unfortunate translation provided by the King James Version to the key word in this parable of Jesus. The word is translated as the word “talent.” The Greek word is *ταλαντον*, *talanton*, plural: *ταλαντα*. Why the King James committee decided to almost transliterate that word, rather than translate it, is beyond me.

Had they chosen accurately to transliterate the words, then the English equivalent would be *talanton*, and that would have been the end of it. After all, in Luke’s version of the parable the chosen coinage is the Greek word, *mina* (μιννα), a much smaller amount. But, by using the English word “talent” the King James Version has forever introduced confusion about native abilities, artistic giftedness, and handiness that is described by the English word, “talent.”

Accordingly, the parable seems to become a message of making maximal use of one’s abilities. The message we tend to carry away is that we are beholden to God and to our Lord Jesus to make the best of our ability to sing, or do woodworking, or write, or paint. Of course, if one’s talents lean toward dancing, or card-playing, or mixing the perfect martini, then we can let those talents slide, because they have no use in the service of the Kingdom. But, by all means, do not bury your talent(s), because that would be shameful.

This, in due course, presents us with a different dilemma. While we are being told that we must maximize our talents, we are at the same time told we must remain humble, that is, minimize our talentedness. *“Do your best, but don’t put yourself forward. That would be boastful and thus, shameful.”* So, we are left wondering: *“Do we put our talents to work or do we bury them?”* That all stems from the connection we inevitably make between talents and *talanta*.

Robert Capon has avoided the problem by referring to this as “The

Parable of the Coins.” That helps somewhat. It notices the difference in coins used by Matthew and Luke. A *mina* (μιννα) was worth about 1/60th of the value of a *talanton* (ταλαντον), or about the equivalent of 100 *denarii*. You may recall that a *denarius* was worth a day’s wage — so a *mina* would have been worth about three to three-and-a-half month’s pay and a *talanton* would have represented more than a year-and-a-half’s wages. We are not talking about insignificant amounts here. But the amounts are almost (please note, I said “almost”) irrelevant.

In Luke’s account, the master gives ten servants each one coin; in Matthew, three servants are given varying amounts: one five *talanta* (almost nine years’ wages), one gets two *talanta* (just over three years) and a third one *talanton* (about a year-and-a-half).

More than the amounts, what is critical to this parable are the master’s instructions — there were none! The servants are not told what they are expected to do with these large sums of money. Each has to make up his own mind, and then devise his own plan, for this money.

Now, we are given one hint about the intentions for the money — Jesus says that the master “**entrusted his property to them**” The Greek word is παραδιδομαι (*paradidomai*), literally “to give across” or “hand over.” Like much of the Koiné Greek in the New Testament, it had become a term from commerce and banking, and carried the meaning of “entrust.”

It is important for us to recognize that the master did not “give” (διδομαι, *didomai*) the servants anything. What the servants controlled they all understood was not theirs. So let’s look at what they did with what they had.

Once again, we don’t know that they did . . . at least not the first two. Jesus says they “traded” — the Greek is ἔργασατο ἐν αὐτοῖς (*ergasato en autois*) “they worked in them.” Mr. Five Coins shows up at his master’s homecoming as Mr. Ten Coins; and Mr. Two Coins shows up as Mr. Four Coins. Somehow — we are not told how — each of these had managed to double their master’s treasure. Did they sink it in the

stock market? At times that looks like a sucker bet, but historically it does bring a good return. Did they invest it in oil futures? . . . commodities? . . . real estate? . . . war profiteering? . . . drug running? Plus, we don't know how long they held the original five and two coins; all we are told is that the master returned "*After a long time. . .*"

These two did what they thought was the right thing, what would please their master. We don't know if they acted prudently or rashly. We don't know if they dealt honestly or predatorily. We don't know much at all about how they came to double their master's "investment" in them.

We do know what happened to Mr. One Coin. He "*went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money.*" Jesus' first hearers would have thought this man to be quite prudent. Banking systems were not as sophisticated as they are today (???), nor as safe (oh yeah, hedge funds, derivatives, toxic assets . . . *ad nauseam*). First, most people did not have coins (and paper money wouldn't come along for centuries); the primary rate of exchange was barter. Those who did have coins liked to keep them where they could see them. Those who had lots of coins (e.g. the master), kept them locked up at home.

So for this man to bury his one coin was not inherently stupid, evil, or even foolhardy . . . that is what lots of people would have done. Imagine then the shock of Jesus' first listeners when the master in the story says to Mr. One Coin: "*You wicked and lazy slave!*" What? Just because he didn't make out as well as Mr. Five Coins he gets an "F" in servanthood? Is that what the Kingdom is about — success? If so, then Joel Osteen has it right.

But this is not the issue. So what is the issue, Mr. Smarty-Pants Doctor Pastor Just? The issue is what drove Mr. One Coin to do what he did. "*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 . . .*" Mr. One Coin is condemned, not for what he did or did not do, but because he acted out of fear. And not just generalized fear, not just any particular fear like "fear of bank books, or fear of grain sacks" that might have

dissuaded him from any number of investments. No, his fear was fear of his master.

So we have to ask: “*Who is this master in the parable?*” Want to guess? Here’s some hints: He is rich and powerful. He went away for a long time. He came back . . . It is Jesus Himself.

Are you afraid of Jesus? What a silly question. Are you afraid of Jesus? Afraid of what He might think of you? Afraid He may be disappointed in you? Do you fear His return because you don’t quite know if you’re ready? For you, is the “Day of the Lord” a day of reckoning or a day of rejoicing? Is it a day to be longed for or a day to be kept at arm’s length? The Master who went away and has been gone a long time is going to return. Is that, for you, Good News?

The central issue in this parable is how we see the master. Mr. Ten Coins and Mr. Four Coins had no fear in working the master’s coins. They did business — which often involves risk-taking, includes suffering some setbacks, and doesn’t always wind up successful. Who knows, a wiser Mr. Two Coins might have pulled off a really good deal with pork belly futures and wound up with sixteen coins. Would he then be considered “better” than Mr. Ten Coins?

No! Listen to how the master commends them both: “***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.***” The commendation is not about success (sorry, Joel Osteen; wrong once again!), it is about being “trustworthy.” The word Jesus uses is πιστος (*pistos*), “faithful” — but while it is tied etymologically to the word for faith πιστις (*pistis*), this word πιστος carries the sense of being honest, reliable, a person of your word (it is also part of the “fruit of the Spirit” Paul discusses in Galatians 5).

The point is not: Were you successful? The point is: Were you faithful? What, in light of this parable, does it mean to be faithful? Normally, I would want to take off on the roots of that English word and proclaim

that it means “*to be filled with faith.*” I could defend that statement on the basis of many contexts in the Bible.

But out of this parable, here’s what faithful means. Mr. One Coin showed up with his one coin and hoped (actually, he rather expected) that his master would tell him what a good boy he had been not to lose the coin. Instead he gets this [I am grateful to Robert Farrar Capon for this response]:

“No! I will judge you out of your own mouth. You are not a good boy. You are not even a good weasel. If you ‘knew’ I was such a tough customer, why didn't you at least put my money into a savings account? What? You thought I'd be mad at a measly 4 1/2 percent? You think I'm not madder at zero percent? But you know something? That's not really what I'm mad about. Look, Arthur. I invited you into a fiduciary relationship with me. That's fiduciary, f-i-d: as in fides in Latin — and as in pistis in Greek and as in faith, in plain English. I didn't ask you to make money, I asked you to do business, to exercise a little pragmatic trust that I meant you well and that I wouldn't mind if you took some risks with my gift of a lifetime. But what did you do? You decided you had to be more afraid of me than of the risks. You decided. You played it safe because of some imaginary fear. And so now, instead of having gotten yourself a nice new life as mayor of at least a small city, you have only the crummy little excuse for a life you started with. As a matter of fact, Mr. One Coin, you haven't even got that, because you know what I'm going to do? I'm going to take what I gave you and just for fun, I'm going to give it to that guy over there who already has more than he knows what to do with. And you know why I'm going to do that? First of all, to remind everybody that when I give you a gift, I expect you to do business with it, to keep it moving, not just to keep it to yourself in some stinking napkin. But second, I'm going to give him your gift to show everybody that I never really cared about results anyway. Don't you see, One Coin? It's all a game. All that matters is that you play at all, not that you play well or badly. You could have earned a million with the money I gave you, or you could have earned two cents. You could even have blown it

on the horses for all I care: at least that way you would have been a gambler after my own heart. But when you crawl in here and insult me — me, Mr. Risk Himself — by telling me you decided that I couldn't be trusted enough for you to gamble on a two-bit loss, that I was some legalistic type who went only by the books well . . . you just listen, you little creep! If you can't live with my kind of acceptance — which is that I can accept absolutely everything except distrust in my acceptance — you can get quite literally the hell out of here. Boys! Show Mr. One Coin the door. I know it's dark out there, but what does he care? He's got a weasely little concept of me in his weasely little mind and he thinks that if he chews on it long enough, it will turn into a bright idea. But it never will, so get rid of him. Let him wear out his weasely little teeth gnawing on it forever.”

So, in the end, the parable is not about abilities, giftedness, dancing, singing, painting, sewing or any other fine talents. It's about talent — *ταλαντον* — God's gift to us: His grace. How we put that to work, how we share it, use it, live out of it — that's the point of this parable.

Do not misread this: Jesus is not saying that our eternal acceptance is dependent on how well we share His grace to us; but that we trust it — and if we do trust His grace, we will act it out. We are not going to act our way into heaven . . . nor will we think our way in, or buy our way in. We will simply have to trust that God in Christ has taken care of everything, and that we can live with complete abandon to the limits of that grace.

Amen.