

PARABLE OF THE TALENTS
Charalambos the Unmercenary Healer

February 10, 2013
16th Sunday after Pentecost
Revision D

Gospel: Matthew 25:14-30, (Luke 19:11-27)

Epistle: 2 Timothy 2:1-10 (See Study for January 20, 2013)

The Parable of the Talents was spoken twice (at least) by Jesus: once before Palm Sunday (recorded in Luke 19) and once after Palm Sunday on Tuesday of Holy Week. The two accounts were given to different audiences and the account in Luke uses the Hebrew monetary term mina instead of the Hebrew unit talent. In the West the Parable of the Talents is used either for the 28th Sunday after Trinity or for the 3rd Sunday before Lent, both using the text from Matthew. The reading from Luke is not used at all. In the East, the reading from Luke is not used for Sunday but is read for the Friday of the 27th week after Pentecost.

Gospel: Matthew 25:14-30, (Luke 19:11-27) 195
 Background..... 195
 The Parable of the Talents 197

Background

The Parable of the Talents was part of a series of teachings Jesus gave regarding Judgment Day and about what He will do when He returns. In this series, He went into what He would be looking for and what basis He will use for judgment. There are four distinct lessons regarding judgment, of which the Gospel lesson for today is the third.

The servant who was made ruler of his master’s household	Matthew 24:45-51, Mark 13:33-37
Parable of the 10 virgins	Matthew 25:1-13
Parable of the talents	Matthew 25:14-30
The Judgment of works	Matthew 25:31-46

The lesson of the first two is watchfulness; the lesson of the last two is judgment based on works. For more details on the Judgment of Works, see the Gospel lesson for Meat Fare Sunday prior to Lent.

The lesson of servant-made-ruler is watchfulness. “Blessed is that servant whom his master, upon his return, will find giving his household food in due season” (Matthew 24:45-46). However, if the servant thinks his master is delayed and beats his fellow servants and parties with the drunkards, his master will return at a time he doesn’t expect. His master will be especially harsh with that servant (cut him in half) and there will be wailing and gnashing of teeth. John Chrysostom wrote¹ that the servant-made-ruler was one who was overcome by the love of carnal pleasure.

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¹ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Matthew, LXXVIII, 1.

The lesson of the ten virgins is also watchfulness. The imagery is taken from wedding celebrations of First Century Israel. It was customary for the groom and his family and attendants to go to the bride's house for the ceremony. Afterward, the bride and groom would be led in a procession to the groom's house by singers and musicians. Along the way, they would pick up some people like the friends of the bride who didn't go to the ceremony. Arriving at the groom's house, they would begin a weeklong celebration. It was this week long celebration that was the setting for Jesus' first miracle when the wine ran out (John 2:1-11).

To be included in the wedding feast, one had to be present in the right place at the right time. If the ceremony wasn't perfectly punctual, one may have had to wait a while. For a week-long celebration, there wasn't the hurry we have today where the bride and groom are anxious to leave. Also, it was customary to leave an oil burning lamp lit all night long in one's bed chamber but with the wick turned down to generate a dim light. While the virgins waited, they turned the wicks down. When they heard the procession coming, they all trimmed their lamps up bright. It was then that the five foolish virgins realized they didn't have enough oil to make it to the groom's house -- and had to go buy more. With no oil or coming late, either way they became indistinguishable from party crashers, and were left out.

John Chrysostom stated² that Jesus used the illustration of virgins in the Parable to direct His remarks to those people dedicated to a very noble and worthwhile cause.

“Great things Jesus had spoken of virginity, saying, ‘There are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the Kingdom of Heaven’s sake. He who is able to accept it, let him accept it’ (Matthew 19:12). He knew also that most men would have a great opinion of it. For indeed the work is by nature great. Yet He did not command this, but left it to the choice of His hearers. Wherefore Paul also said, ‘Now concerning virgins, I have no commandment of the Lord’” (1 Corinthians 7:25).

However, even if one³ has dedicated his life to a good cause, yet does not show the fruitfulness of good works such as almsgiving and showing mercy, everything is wasted and the Lord says, “I do not know you!” (Matthew 25:12).

“Since the dedication to virginity is great and has great honor with the multitude, one might feel as though he had attained it all and be careless about other things. Therefore He put forth this Parable to persuade them that virginity, though it should have everything else, if destitute of the good things arising out of almsgiving, is cast out with the harlots. He called the five virgins foolish for undergoing the greater labor and yet betraying all for want of the lesser. By lamps, He means the gift of virginity, the purity of holiness; and by oil, He means humanity, almsgiving, and aid to them that are in need”.

When the five wise virgins said to the five foolish virgins, ‘Go to those that sell, and buy for yourselves’ (Matthew 25:9), Chrysostom interpreted⁴ the ‘sellers’ as the poor.

² John Chrysostom, Homilies on Matthew, LXXVIII, 1.

³ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Matthew, LXXVIII, 2.

⁴ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Matthew, LXXVIII, 2.

“Do you see what great profit arises to us from the poor? Should you take them away, you would take away the great hope of our salvation. Wherefore here must we get together the oil, that it may be useful to us there, when the time calls us. Nothing is more defiled than celibacy that doesn’t have mercy”.

The Judgment of Works is the subject of the 2nd Sunday before Lent in the Eastern Church and describes a scene where a person is judged based on how he treated the Lord Himself. Both the righteous and the cursed expressed surprise at having done anything for the Lord Himself. However, the Lord was speaking in mysteries again, and He spoke of His body, the Church, (which included the least of these my brethren) as being synonymous with Himself. (For more on this topic, see the Union with Christ discussion in Ephesians 4:1-16 for the 25th Sunday after Pentecost.)

The Parable of the Talents

The Hebrew word *kikkar* corresponds to the Greek word *talanton* and is transliterated into English from Greek. It was a measure of weight and in its original usage, denoted the maximum weight a man could carry. For example, the golden lamp stand in the tabernacle was made from a talent of gold. The Greek word *talanton* has its root meaning implying a balance (that is used to weigh precious metals) and may have been a more precise measurement. In the 1st Century, the talent represented a weight of about 75 pounds Troy.

The Hebrew word *maneh* corresponds to the Greek word *mina* and is also transliterated from Greek into English. The *mina* represented a weight of 1.25 pounds Troy. In the context of the Gospel lesson where a master gave his slaves 1, 2 or 5 talents or minas, this refers to that weight in silver, the common currency. In terms of buying power, 84 denarii were minted from one pound of silver and one denarius was a day’s wage for a laborer (Matthew 20:1-13). Thus, translating talents to denarii:

one talent = 6,300 denarii
one mina = 105 denarii

The Parables of the Talents and Minas were told just a few days apart and both relate to the Kingdom of Heaven (Matthew 25:1, 14; Luke 19:11). Table I is a side-by-side comparison of the features of the two parables. In Matthew, Jesus likened the Kingdom of Heaven to a man traveling to a far country (Matthew 25:14). In Luke, He likened the Kingdom to a nobleman who went to a far country to receive a kingdom for himself (Luke 19:12). The reason for telling the parable is given in Luke as “because they thought the Kingdom of God would appear immediately” (Luke 19:11). Gregory the Great, Pope of Rome (6th Century) said⁵ that the man or nobleman traveling to a far country represents our Lord ascending into heaven in the flesh that He assumed at the incarnation.

Cyril of Alexandria (4th-5th Century) concurred and stated⁶ that the scope of the Parable covers the whole purpose of the dispensation to man and of the mystery of Christ from the beginning to the end. To illustrate this, Cyril reviewed what the Scriptures had said regarding

⁵ Gregory the Great, Parables of the Gospel, IX.

⁶ Cyril of Alexandria, Commentary on the Gospel of Luke, Homily 128, Studion Publishers, 1983, pp. 508-510.

the beginning of the Parable: “A certain nobleman went into a far country to receive for Himself a Kingdom and to return” (Luke 19:12). “Christ ascended to the Father, and became a man journeying to a far country; for heaven is a different country from earth; and He ascended that He might receive for Himself a Kingdom. When He ascended into heaven, He sat down at the Right Hand of the Majesty on High until His enemies are made a footstool for His feet (Psalm 110:1)”.

However, “His citizens hated Him and sent a delegation after Him saying, ‘We will not have this Man to reign over us’” (Luke 19:14). Cyril mentioned that Christ had reproached the Jewish leaders: “If I had not done among them the works which no one else ever did, they would have no sin; but now they have seen and also hated both Me and My Father” (John 15:24).

The prophets had continually told the nation of Israel to expect the King: “Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Behold your King is coming to you! He is just and endowed with salvation, humble and mounted on a donkey” (Zechariah 9:9). “Behold a King will reign righteously and princes will rule justly” (Isaiah 32:1). “But I have been made King by Him on Zion, His holy mountain, declaring the ordinance of the Lord” (Psalm 2:6,7 LXX).

“But the Jewish leaders rejected their King. Pontus Pilate asked them, ‘Shall I crucify your King? They answered, ‘we have no king but Caesar!’ (John 19:15). Cyril concluded⁷ that they denied the Kingdom of Christ and fell under the domination of Satan, and brought upon themselves the yoke of sin which cannot be thrown off. ‘Whoever commits sin is a slave of sin. And a slave does not abide in the house forever, but a son abides forever. Therefore, if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed’ (John 8:34-36). Israel in its madness was not open to instruction, and therefore it has continued in slavery”.

The Talents or minas, that the Lord gave to his slaves represents “the Grace that was given to us according to the measure of Christ’s gift” (Ephesians 4:7). Paul then quoted Psalm 68:18 regarding this: “When He ascended on high, He led captivity captive and gave gifts to men” (Ephesians 4:8). In the Parable of the Minas, all were given the same gift; in the Parable of the Talents, some were given more than others. This denotes that “there are varieties of gifts, but the same spirit. There are differences of deaconates (Greek: *diakonia*), but the same Lord” (1 Corinthians 12:4-5). And yet also, “for everyone to whom much is given, from him much will be required; and to whom much has been committed, of him they will ask the more” (Luke 12:48). In the words of Gregory the Great⁸, this should make a man more humble and inspire him to use his gift more diligently in God’s service.

Cyril pointed out⁹ that the nobleman did not give talents (or minas) to those that hated Him, but only to His slaves. “These have been entrusted with these gifts according to the measure of each one’s readiness and disposition. The distribution was made suitably to the measure of each one’s faculties. ‘These are those who eat solid food (not babies who drink only milk) and are mature, those who by reason of practice have their senses exercised to discern good and evil’ (Hebrews 5:13, 14). Examples of these are the wise disciples and those who

⁷ Cyril of Alexandria, Commentary on the Gospel of Luke, Homily 128, Studion Publishers, 1983, pp. 508-510.

⁸ Gregory the Great, Parables of the Gospel, IX.

⁹ Cyril of Alexandria, Commentary on the Gospel of Luke, Homily 129, Studion Publishers, 1983, pp. 511-513.

succeeded them, including those who stand at the head of the holy churches who ‘shine as lights in the world holding fast the Word of Life’ (Philippians 2:15). These do business with their minas (Luke 19:13) and trade with their talents (Matthew 25:16) and seek spiritual increase. ‘Who then is that faithful and wise steward (literally household manager) whom his Master will make ruler of over His household, to give them their portion of food in due season? Blessed is that slave whom his Master will find so doing when He comes; He will make him ruler over all that He has’ (Luke 12:42-44). Giving one’s fellow servants food is the distribution of the benefits of spiritual instruction and satisfying those who hunger after righteousness”.

Gregory went on to suggest¹⁰ that the gift of the five talents represents external (that is, physical or scientific) knowledge or the use of the five senses. These persons, he said, may not understand interior or mystical things, but yet, “by their desire for their heavenly home, teach sound doctrine to all whom they meet, doctrine concerning those exterior matters which they can understand”.

The gift of the two talents as suggested by Gregory represents understanding and action. “They understand the subtleties of the interior life and when they teach by their learning and example, they derive as it were a double profit from their trading”.

TABLE I
Comparison of Parables of Talents and Minas

	PARABLE OF TALENTS	PARABLE OF MINAS
master called	“Lord”	nobleman
journey	to a far country	to a far country
purpose	-----	to receive a kingdom
distribution of silver	5, 2, 1 talents	1 mina each
earnings	5 yielded 5 more 2 yielded 2 more 1 yielded 0	1st yielded 10 more 2nd yielded 5 more another yielded 0
rewards	5: ruler over much 2: ruler over much 1: cast into outer darkness	1st: authority over 10 cities 2nd: authority over 5 cities another: mina taken away

Of the one talent hidden in the ground, Gregory said¹¹, “To hide one’s talent in the earth is to occupy the intelligence God gives us in purely earthly matters, not to seek spiritual profit, never to lift our heart above worldly considerations. For there are some who received the gift of understanding, but who, nevertheless, understand only the flesh. Of these, the Prophet says (Jeremiah 4:22) ‘they are wise to do evil, but to do good they have no knowledge’”.

¹⁰ Gregory the Great, Parables of the Gospel, IX.

¹¹ Gregory the Great, Parables of the Gospel, IX.

As Gregory interpreted¹² the Parable of the Talents, the one given five talents was not necessarily greater in the Kingdom of God than the one given just two. Each was given gifts according to his ability (Matthew 25:15), but Gregory interpreted them as being for different purposes. In the Parable of the Minas, on the other hand, each slave was given an equal amount. Some members of the Body of Christ may seem to us to be greater in the Kingdom of God than others (like an eye may seem more important than an ear in 1 Corinthians 12:14-18); but that is not our call to judge. After all, the Lord has said that the first will be last and the last, first (Matthew 16:28-30). In the Parable of the Minas, the one rewarded the most was the one who earned the most return (Luke 19:16-17). In some cases, it may be that the person who was forgiven much and therefore loved much (Luke 7:40-47) was the more motivated. This was likely the case of the Apostle Paul, who considered himself the least of the Apostles because of his former persecution of the Church (1 Corinthians 15:9-10).

A result common to both parables is that the one talent or mina that was taken away from the slave who didn't use it, was given to the one who had the most (Matthew 25:28, Luke 19:24). In both cases, the slave who didn't use his silver was called wicked, and made excuses as to why he did nothing. His master said that at least he could have deposited his money with the bankers; they would have used it and would have given him interest for the use of the money (Matthew 25:27, Luke 19:23). Chrysostom referred¹³ to the depositing money with the bankers to earn interest as speaking out, admonishing and advising within the Church. How many people who don't use their gifts could have their gifts be used in the Church if only they would come and participate? On the other hand, those who use their gifts have more gifts given to them (Matthew 25:29, Luke 19:26).

Chrysostom commented¹⁴, "Let no man say, 'I have but one talent', and can do nothing; for you can even by one talent approve yourself. For you are not poorer than that widow (who gave two mites, or 1/64 of a denarius, which was all she had -Luke 21:1-4). You are not more uninstructed than Peter and John, who were both 'unlearned and ignorant men' (Acts 4:13). But nevertheless, since they showed forth zeal, and did all things for the common good, they attained to Heaven. For nothing is so pleasing to God as to live for the common advantage."

Chrysostom also pointed out¹⁵ that the penalty came with heavy accusation: "Cast the unprofitable slave into the outer darkness. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matthew 25:30). "Do you see how not only the spoiler and the covetous, not only the doer of evil things but also he that refuses to do good things is punished with extreme punishment".

¹² Gregory the Great, Parables of the Gospel, IX

¹³ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Matthew, LXXVIII, 2.

¹⁴ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Matthew, LXXVIII, 2.

¹⁵ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Matthew, LXXVIII, 2.