

## SERMON FOR THE 10<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST (Cape Town - 9 August 2009)

**Text:** <sup>14</sup>“Again, it will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted his property to them. <sup>15</sup>To one he gave five talents of money, to another two talents, and to another one talent, each according to his ability. Then he went on his journey. <sup>16</sup>The man who had received the five talents went at once and put his money to work and gained five more. <sup>17</sup>So also, the one with the two talents gained two more. <sup>18</sup>But the man who had received the one talent went off, dug a hole in the ground and hid his master’s money. <sup>19</sup>“After a long time the master of those servants returned and settled accounts with them. <sup>20</sup>The man who had received the five talents brought the other five. ‘Master,’ he said, ‘you entrusted me with five talents. See, I have gained five more.’ <sup>21</sup>“His master replied, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master’s happiness!’ <sup>22</sup>“The man with the two talents also came. ‘Master,’ he said, ‘you entrusted me with two talents; see, I have gained two more.’ <sup>23</sup>“His master replied, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master’s happiness!’ <sup>24</sup>“Then the man who had received the one talent came. ‘Master,’ he said, ‘I knew that you are a hard man, harvesting where you have not sown and gathering where you have not scattered seed. <sup>25</sup>So I was afraid and went out and hid your talent in the ground. See, here is what belongs to you.’ <sup>26</sup>“His master replied, ‘You wicked, lazy servant! So you knew that I harvest where I have not sown and gather where I have not scattered seed? <sup>27</sup>Well then, you should have put my money on deposit with the bankers, so that when I returned I would have received it back with interest. <sup>28</sup>”“Take the talent from him and give it to the one who has the ten talents. <sup>29</sup>For everyone who has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him. <sup>30</sup>And throw that worthless servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. (Matthew 25:14-30)

As I have told you so often before, what makes the parables of Jesus so interesting and captivating is that invariably there is in an unexpected twist in the story. On a first reading, this particular parable seems to be an exception to the rule. What Jesus describes here seems to be the most obvious and most normal thing to do. In fact, there is nothing *striking* or *unusual* in the whole story at all.

For a moment just imagine somebody would entrust you with a large sum of money. What would you do? I think, the very last thing you would do is to dig a hole and hide the money there, just to give it back in a few years time. And if that is the action you decide on, then you should rightly be admonished. To put it bluntly, it is plain stupid behaviour and makes no economic sense at all.

Normal or prudent behaviour would be to do what that first two servants in this parable did. As they, you would apply your mind to see how you can make that money grow. Putting your money in the bank to gain some interest, wouldn’t be a bad option right now. But - as we all know - there are times, when you can make even more money by investing it elsewhere. Maybe you can buy property, or you can invest it on the stock market, if and when it recovers of course.

But what you would *not* do is dig a hole and hide it. It makes no sense. If you have money available, or some money has been *entrusted* to you, you should make it work for you to gain more profits. This is exactly what the first two servants do and they get lauded for it.

So where is the twist in the story? The main twist in the story you don't recognise if you don't understand the economics of the first century. Fact is, in ancient times it was morally and ethically wrong and indeed deplorable behaviour to make profits. This is spelled out in a number of Old Testament passages. With regard to earning "interest" on your money, for example, we read in the book of Deuteronomy: ***"Do not charge your brother interest, whether on money or food or anything else"*** (23:19). This sounds a bit odd to the modern reader. Why shouldn't I charge interest, we do it all the time? The reason was that ancient cultures believed that goods in any given society were limited. There was only "that" much available. This means, if I become richer, then obviously somebody else is getting poorer. Or if I am earning interest, then somebody else is losing that money that is being paid to me. In those days, therefore, if you increased your wealth you were regarded in that society to be a thief.

This is the reason why in this parable, it is totally "shocking" that the landowner lauds his two servants who took their talents and made five and two more respectively. Believe or not, In ancient society what the "third servant" did (who buried the money) was the honourable behaviour. In fact the Jewish Law explicitly says: *"Money can only be guarded (responsibly) by placing it in the earth"*. Any person who did it, was legally covered against any loss. According to the law therefore the third servant *should* have been lauded. He acted responsibly. What was entrusted to him he gave back as he had received it.

But this servant gets no praise. In fact he is severely reprimanded by his boss. His boss is angry. And to make matters worse, he take the one talent entrusted to this servant away and gives it to the others. And then he throws him into the darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth.

The first century listeners were shocked. But we would most probably agree and say: "He got exactly what he deserved. How can he be so stupid just to bury than money and not use it?"

But those who judge must be careful not to be judged themselves. Ancient listeners can still be excused. Their perception on society and "limited goods" let them astray. But this is not the case with us. We know money not used, loses its value. It needs to be invested. This is the reason why in our every day life we apply our minds to

increase our wealth and to fine-tune our talents. We work hard and we are focussed, because we know: If we don't, we might even lose what have.

But if that is the case, then the critical question posed by Jesus to us is: Why then - if it comes to the kingdom of God - is there so little impetus by God's children? So many Christians are just like the 3<sup>rd</sup> servant. They have great talents, great abilities but they do not use them to further the Kingdom of God. They apply them in the world, but not in the work of God. They apply them to enrich themselves, but if it comes to God's work, there is lack of focus, a lack of impetus, a lack of dedication.

I believe, first and foremost, this parable wants to remind us: God has given you some great talents. A (one) talent by the way, is not a small amount of money. It is millions, highlighting the generosity of God. Maybe God has gifted you to organise well. Maybe you have networking skills. Maybe you can speak well and encourage people. Or maybe you are gifted in teaching or music. And maybe you *are* using these skills in the world. But Jesus is challenging you to use your talents also in his kingdom of God to bring glory to him.

Our contributions will of course differ. The parable clearly states that people are gifted differently. The one servant gets five talents, the other two, the third servant one talent. And because we are all gifted differently, what God expects from us differs. This parable does not contrast those who contribute greatly and those who contribute less. It is contrast between those who make their talents available to God and those who don't. Ask God: "Where do you want to use me? God, you have gifted me, show me those areas where I can make a difference (for you)."

Maybe you have heard the following story. It isn't really a story, but rather a personal question. The question is:

What would the church be like if every member was just like me?

- Would our church be empty on Sundays, or full and overflowing, if everyone attended as I do?
- How much would get done by the committees and groups of the church if everyone were as willing as I am?
- How many bruised, hurting, lonely people would be touched by the church if every member acted exactly as I did?
- Would we need more offering plates if everyone gave like me?
- How many people would be led to know about the love of Jesus, his forgiveness and eternal life if everyone had my priorities?"

This last line is really what the parable is all about. God want his forgiveness, his

love, his gift of salvation to be carried into this world. What he has entrusted to us, is really *His Word*. This word you don't bury in a hole. You carry it out. You work with it.

But do you know what prevents us from working with the Word of God? Do you know what prevents us from playing a more positive role in church? More often than not it is "fear". We are sacred, we may do something wrong. Or we are scared for the criticism we may get. The third servant was scared he would lose the money. That is why he buried it.

But for us Christian there is no reason to be scared. Maybe you don't realise it, but the line "Do not fear" features at least 250 times in the Bible. God says it over and over again: Do not fear, *because I am* with you.

Maybe you have been prompted by the Spirit of God to do something or to say something to somebody. Do it! And the more you make yourself available to God, the more he will entrust to you, and the greater your talents will become. And your joy as a child of God will overflow.

There is also a warning in this parable, which we cannot ignore. Jesus makes it clear: Those who hide their God-given talents, will loose them. The one talent is taken away from the third servant, and given to the others. And it is true: Those who don't make themselves available to God, tend to drift away. Their life becomes empty and meaningless.

True life, the reality of God's Kingdom, is discovered in serving. And those who serve God, will realise that the perception that the third servant had of his master, is all wrong. He said: "***I knew that you are a hard man, harvesting where you have not sown and gathering where you have not scattered seed (that is why I hit my talent)***". But it is not how God is. Those who serve God experience him totally differently. They learn how loving and gracious he is. They learn, whatever you give him, he gives you are hundredfold back again. They hear this parable not as a law, but as a privilege: "I have been entrusted by God with great talents. May he get the glory." Amen.

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