Trading with our Talents

The Parable of The Talents by Willem de Poorter (1608-1649)

There is, unfortunately, a common misconception these days that in order to succeed in life you have to work *very* hard, but in order to enter Heaven, you need to do nearly nothing at all. Unless the deceased had been in charge of a concentration camp, or was a serial killer, the common consensus seems to be that "he's in Heaven." Our Lord's Parable of the Talents in St. Matthew's Gospel (Matt. 25:14-30) dispels that falsehood and gives us food for thought.

Looking at the Parable, there are several things worth noting. First, there is a master and three servants. It may be terribly obvious, but we are the servants and God is the Master. That is, we are not masters, we are servants. This is in contradiction to the popular attitude that we are our own masters and need not obey *anyone.* We are the servants, God is the Master. If we kept this truth in mind, life would make a lot more sense.

Second, the Master leaves for a long journey. Indeed, the span of the journey may be seen as our lifetimes. Our Lord will summon us before Him at a time known only to Himself and we will have to give an account of what we have done with all we were given.

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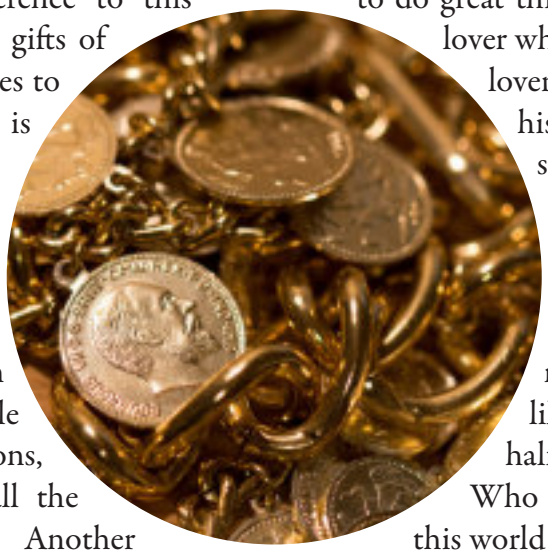
Lastly, the master gives his servants different amounts to trade with according to each one's ability. The talents are not distributed haphazardly, but according to the master's wisdom in assessing the ability of each of his servants. It is interesting to note that we're not told of any envy of one servant towards another. No doubt, it is beyond the scope and lesson of the parable, yet we can reflect that the talents, after all, do not belong to the servants but to the master. Hence, if a servant truly loved his master, he would rejoice to see the master receive *more* benefit from a fellow servant's shrewd use his talents than he would from his own. As Saint Paul writes, "What have you that you did not receive? If

then you received it, why do you boast as if it were not a gift?" (1 Cor 4:7).

We now come to the question of what exactly is a talent and what does it represent in this parable? A talent was a measure of weight in the ancient world, used to describe large quantities of precious metals — copper, silver, or gold. One talent was about fifteen years' worth of wages for a day worker. In our modern currency, that might be equivalent to a million dollars.

As to what it represents, we tend to think of talents as our natural abilities. The Catechism of the Catholic Church makes reference to this parable in speaking of all the gifts of nature and grace that God gives to each one of us. However, this is not the only interpretation.



St. Thomas Aquinas sees the talents as the weight of grace in the soul that would incline it towards the work of God, much as Actual Grace does in our day to day lives. These little (and not so little) inspirations, help us do God's Will in all the circumstances of our lives. Another interpretation given by Scripture Scholars is that the talents could represent knowledge of the Kingdom of God. We are all bound to grow in that knowledge both by meditating on the Word of God and living a life of prayer. Sadly, there are many people who go through life with a five year old's understanding of their faith. The gift of Faith was meant to be used and developed.

In any case, if we say that the talents are the gifts of grace that we received at baptism and, above all, the gift of Charity, or love of God and neighbor, it may make more sense as to the judgment that the master pronounces at the end of the parable. For, as St. John of the Cross says, "at the evening of life, we shall be judged on our love."

St. Francis de Sales, in his *Treatise on the Love of God*, tells how the supernatural virtues grow in our souls with each act, even the smallest. This means that every act of charity increases charity in our souls! This is contrary to the way that natural virtues grow.

Much like muscles, natural virtues need to be exercised more as they grow stronger. On the other hand, every act of the supernatural virtues, such as charity, produces an increase in that virtue. Truly, this explains why the two servants who traded with their talents suffered no losses but only increased the talents they had been given. Just to act with charity is to grow charity within your soul!

Here, also, it is worth mentioning that love desires to do great things for the beloved. There is no lover who would not want to promise his lover the moon, even though he knew his chances of delivering it would be slim, at best. When it comes to our love for God, we are often shamed by worldly men and women. They work hard for the passing things of this world—money, power, honors, and the like—while we too often give halfhearted service to our Lord, Who is more lovable than anything in this world and Who rewards us with things that are far greater and last far longer (for eternity, in fact)!

One reason that we do not consistently desire to do great things for God has to do with fear. Like the third servant, we may believe the lie that our God is a hard master to serve. We begin to count the cost of discipleship; the things we have to give up, the things we have to do, etc. Perhaps a certain ingratitude takes hold of us. An ingratitude for the talents that He has given us that borders on insolence: "I didn't ask for life! I didn't want this job! I want to be left alone and do my own thing!" May we recognize that all is pure gift from God and be grateful for it. Here, too, is the secret to multiplying even one talent: gratitude!

Finally, we come to the reward given the two faithful servants at the end of the parable. First we are told that because they were faithful in a very little, they will be given much. Recall that, if

anything, a talent was NOT a very little. Yet, what is great in the eyes of this world, is little in the eyes of God. That said, the Master then invites these two to enter into His joy. Here is the ultimate reward— JOY! We have joy when we rest in the possession of the thing we love. To rest in the eternal love of God is the ultimate joy.

So, as we begin a new year, may we remember that life is short and strive to increase our love for God in the circumstances and opportunities He gives us each day. May we set out to do great things with the talents that He has given us, that is, to glorify Him as much as we are able on this earth. And so, when the day of our departure from this life comes, may we also hear those happy words, "Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a little, I will set you over much; enter into the joy of your master" (Matt. 25:21).