

Matthew 25:14-30
Kingdom Vision or Wisdom Observation

When we read these stories which Jesus told, we try to explain them so as to give us a deeper understanding of God; of what this world would look like if God's will prevailed and humanity became obedient. So usually the first step in this process is to determine who or what the various characters described in the story are supposed to represent; what they are telling us about God or God's way. In many of the parables the immediate association with a landowner/master character is to consider that character as a stand-in for God or for the way God works in the world. And that is pretty much the way that I have often heard this parable proclaimed. Its placement following the parable of the wise and foolish bridesmaids that begins with the phrase "the kingdom of heaven is like..." seems to connect it with what happens when Christ returns and judgment is pronounced on the actions of humanity while he has been away. In this parable, the master leaves on a journey. Then after some extended time he comes back so the setting resembles that of the bridegroom who after a delay comes back so the wedding festivities can begin. If that comparison is continued, then the three slaves take on the role of the bridesmaids who are waiting for the bridegroom's return. Thus the point would be about what they did in their master's absence. The usual conclusion from making these comparisons is to conclude that those awaiting the return are not to be passively waiting, but are to be actively faithful. The bridesmaids' lamps were to be filled with righteousness so they would continue to burn and give light; the slaves were to actively use the money and produce a profit which it is usually assumed would be gain for the master. Since the two slaves who showed the master more than they had been given are praised and told "well done, good and faithful slave" while the third slave receives a harsh indictment "you wicked and lazy slave" it is easy to view this as a judgment about using the "talents" given to us. We often impose a current definition of talent onto this word making it the use of God-given abilities. In the context of the parable however, a talent was a piece of money. The master has divided his property in terms of coin among three slaves and left on a journey. The master seems to have already made judgments about each slave's potential so different amounts are given. Upon his return, the parable describes the master settling accounts with the slaves. Unfortunately, the image of the master's settling of accounts is not what I would call an encouraging one. It seems more to me in the nature of a threat—you have been given something and if God is this master, it seems you will receive a very harsh punishment, not for wrong doing, but for doing nothing. I think this explanation for this story told by Jesus leaves something to be desired, if that is all that we understand from it. That view which the third slave had of a harsh master which resulted in the fear which led him to hide what he was given is realized and his fear seems to be justified. Doubling what we have been given for example seems a pretty high standard to earn praise. Matthew clearly indicates that our actions will be judged, but I am not sure judgment is all what this parable is truly about. For instance, the word which is usually translated as entrusted in this passage actually more often has a somewhat different meaning. When you say that something has been entrusted to someone, it implies that they have just been given custody of it for awhile. It doesn't belong to them, but is still the property of the original

owner. The Greek word used by Matthew here is more often translated in other passages as “to hand over or to deliver”. This carries more of a one time, one way action than to entrust. In fact, this verb is the one used when Matthew tells us that Jesus was handed over at his arrest. That action was clearly a one way action. No implication that what was done would be reversed. If we change the phrase in this text to a more literal translation, the result is: “and did deliver to them his substance” instead of “entrusted his property to them.” That takes away some of the inference about the “talents” still belonging to the master. If you examine the text carefully, when the slaves who are praised come forward with their report, the text does not tell us that they gave the “talents” back to the master. In fact, even with the slave who receives condemnation and has the one talent taken from him, it is given not back to the master, but to the slave who was originally given the most talents. The master does come back to settle the accounts with them, to discover what they have done with what was given to them and pronounce judgment on their actions. But nowhere in the passage does the master reclaim what has been given or the additional amount. This working with the text not only raises a question about the simple usual interpretation I described, but also seems to discount another interpretation I found in my studies. Since that other commentary focused on the harshness of the “master”, I want to examine it a bit. After all, the image of a harsh God pronouncing this type of treatment for the third slave is unsettling to say the least. I imagine many of us wonder if we would meet the standard of doubling what has been given to us. This alternative interpretation states that this parable does not feature God’s kingdom at all, but is a description of the broken world. Jesus’ listeners would have known that the slaves who received praise for increasing what they had been given by doubling it, would have actually been in violation of the Torah. First, it was against the laws of Moses to charge interest. Second, the promise had been that every family of the twelve tribes who entered the Promised Land would receive and hold a share of that land forever. Thus, those who had gotten rich did so by stealing what belonged to others. This view uses as support verse 26 where the master states: “I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter.” This implies that the “profit” that the two praised slaves brought to the meeting as well as the original talents belonged to the master. To Jesus’ Jewish audience it would have been the third slave who did the right thing—he did not use the wealth to “steal” even more and he protected what did not belong to him. He knew the world was harsh, but did the best that he could honorably do. Using this analysis of the passage, this becomes a statement not about the kingdom, but about the world we actually live in. In fact, if we go back to the opening of this story, it indeed does not begin with the usual formula that the kingdom of heaven is like... So perhaps this is just another way of explaining that we should not expect this world to look like the kingdom until Christ actually returns. We should not expect to be rewarded here for doing what we know is right, nor should we be surprised when those whose ways are not kingdom ways get rewarded. I would call this understanding of the parable a “wisdom observation”, a statement which like the predictions of coming persecutions also found in the gospel accounts is more about what the world will be like before Christ’s return than what God’s kingdom will be like. But although I recognize some valid points in this analysis, it does not satisfy me in all aspects. As a matter of fact, although these two ways of looking at the parable are so very different, it seems to me both have some truth in them that we need to understand. But parables are very complex and

multilayered. They challenge us. So I am going to go back and look at the parable from a different viewpoint. Possibly it is a lingering aspect of the Godly Play method interacting with Biblical stories, but there the story is approached with “I wonder questions.” Questions like: “Who is the most important character?” or “Where are you in the story?” The question which occurred to me as I re-read the passage was: why was the third slave fearful. The opening verses give no indication about the character of the master. If anything we would infer that he was an incredibly generous master. He delivered the talents to the three slaves and left. A single talent was a very large sum of money. In ancient times the basic wage was one denarius a day. It would have taken 20 years of work at that wage to earn even the one talent given to the third slave. That would mean that the slave who got 5 talents had in his possession wages for 100 years, the slave with the 10 talents suddenly had 200 years of wages. If I was suddenly summoned into the presence of a master and given that much wealth, I can easily imagine being overwhelmed, more like the third slave who actually received the least amount. Yet the two slaves who received the most do not act fearful. Until we reach the point in the story where the third slave gives his accounting there is no clue ahead of time about the character of the master. When they receive the money, the first two slaves go out and do things with it as if it were a normal thing. It is only the one who receives the least amount who says anything about the master being harsh. It is the third slave who believes the master reaps where he does not sow and gathers where he did not scatter seed. He is fearful because of his perception of the master. The master does not either affirm or deny this assessment of his nature. Instead he replies with a question of his own, verse 26-27: “But his master replied, ‘You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers I would have received what was my own with interest.’” At this point the talent is taken away and given to another slave and this fearful slave is punished by being thrown into outer darkness. It seems that the third slave’s perceptions have become a self-fulfilling prophecy. So my question for us this morning, is for us to consider how our perceptions of God affect the way we act—not only in our relationship with God, but also with each other. If we take the viewpoint of the third slave and fear God, if we view God as primarily an enforcer of rules, if we see God as a stern master who is prone to punishment, then we often come to believe that everything that is bad which happens in our lives is punishment from God. If on the other hand, we view God primarily in terms of the generous and loving master we will be surprised and uplifted by the numerous gifts and moments of grace we experience around us. If we experience God’s love in our lives it becomes easier to share it with others. To me, the difference between the slaves pronounced good and faithful and the third slave was a matter of perception about their master. The first two trusted in the generosity of the master and were confident in their living which was rewarded. That is the good news in this parable: God is generous with those who trust in his grace.