

I heard you were a hard man. Finding the punch line.

Sometimes the parables of Jesus are not easy to comprehend and it is difficult to grasp their meaning. As a consequence if I misunderstand them, their particular relevance and application to my own individual situation becomes very muddled, to the point that the significance of the parable is lost on me. This is a great shame because we should be looking to mine these great stories to discover their real relevance for our lives, so that they can illuminate us and teach us something revealing about ourselves and the way we live out our Christian vocation.

I wonder if this parable of the talents is one in point. There are many layers to it and it can easily be turned into an allegory about the Early Church and its mission in the world leading to the Second Coming of Christ on Judgement Day. Another interpretation centres on the actual meaning of the word *talent* which in our culture has come a long way from the meaning it has in the story. In the story it simply refers to an amount of money, whereas we now think of a *talent* as a skill acquired, or a gift received, to be nurtured and honed for our own benefit as well as the benefit of those around us. Thus when we now look at the end of the story we might well see it as an admonishment for whoever wastes his natural God given talent. Whilst both of these interpretations may very well be valid and informative, I'm not really sure if either of these views were in the mind of Jesus when he offered this story to the disciples. So what are we to make of it?

The fact that Matthew has used the story for his own purposes seems beyond question. Compare the story with Luke's version and you'll see what I mean. Matthew certainly has the thought that this is a story designed to encourage the Early Church in its missionary duty. Remember Matthew's Gospel closes with the words of Jesus instructing the disciples to *go out to the whole world to make disciples of all nations...* Yet we know that the whole point of a parable is that it has to make its impact on the individual listener, so that he/she can really sense that its moral imperative applies directly to their personal circumstances. So where is the punch line in this story? Where do I feel the blow, and having felt it am I moved to make the decision to change my ways?

One clue is given from the very outset. Notice that the master entrusts his money to his servants *each in proportion to their ability*. He knows them and he knows of what they are capable and of how they are likely to respond. Should he therefore have been so surprised when the servant who was given one talent failed to make more? At the same time consider the servant's remarks to his master – ignore if you will the master's reply - just consider the servant's words as he makes his excuse. *I had heard you were a hard man*. Here is something which should prick up our ears. *I had heard*. How often we fall into this trap of failing to make a relationship with God because of something that we had heard from someone else. Why are we so willing to allow our image of God to be shaped and formed through misunderstanding and misinformation? How regularly do we hear the comment “why do bad things happen to good people?” and as a result cast aside any notion of God because of the indifference on my part even to explore what is possible?

The parable is pointing out that we each have a responsibility to come to a relationship with God by opening out our minds to receive the gift which he offers, rather than simply closing our minds down. We can choose to refuse, as the story relates, or we can choose to accept, and in accepting we find a God who is full of love and compassion, slow in anger and abounding in mercy. The responsibility is ours.