

God, Man, & MAMMON

Navigating the tension between
the material and the spiritual

Chapter 14



with
Mitch
Anthony

GOD EXPECTS A RETURN ON HIS INVESTMENT

With the parables of talents and the parable of the feast, Jesus makes clear to us that our priorities must be other-worldly. We must be willing to take risks for the Kingdom and to prioritize the characteristics that mark our citizenship.



GOD EXPECTS A RETURN ON HIS INVESTMENT

"It's also like a man going off on an extended trip. He called his servants together and delegated responsibilities. To one he gave five thousand dollars, to another two thousand, to a third one thousand, depending on their abilities. Then he left. Right off, the first servant went to work and doubled his master's investment. The second did the same. But the man with the single thousand dug a hole and carefully buried his master's money.

After a long absence, the master of those three servants came back and settled up with them. The one given five thousand dollars showed him how he had doubled his investment. His master commended him: 'Good work! You did your job well. From now on be my partner.'

The servant with the two thousand showed how he also had doubled his master's investment. His master commended him: 'Good work! You did your job well. From now on be my partner.'

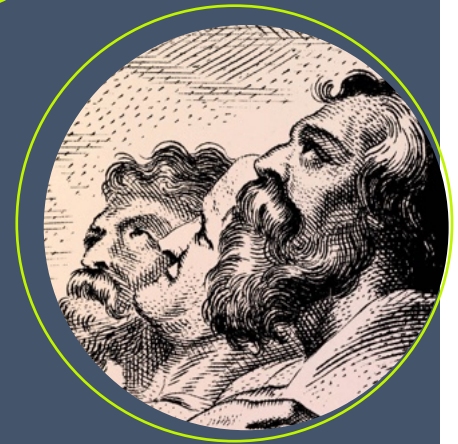
The servant given one thousand said, 'Master, I know you have high standards and hate careless ways, that you demand the best and make no allowances for error. I was afraid I might disappoint you, so I found a good hiding place and secured your money. Here it is, safe and sound down to the last cent.'

The master was furious. 'That's a terrible way to live! It's criminal to live cautiously like that! If you knew I was after the best, why did you do less than the least? The least you could have done would have been to invest the sum with the bankers, where at least I would have gotten a little interest.'

'Take the thousand and give it to the one who risked the most. And get rid of this 'play-it-safe' who won't go out on a limb. Throw him out into utter darkness.'"

– Matthew 25:14-30, MSG

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This story, referred to as “The parable of the talents,” is frequently told in such a way that accentuates how we must use our “talents” for God. Because modern tellers of the story ascribe the modern usage and meaning of “a talent” when explaining the parable, misinterpretation of the language causes hearers to grossly miss the point. The talent Jesus referred to was a measure of money—a sum having great significance to the recipient. One talent weighed as much as 3,000 shekels. One talent of silver would be like having a bag containing 3,000 half-dollars! A talent was as much weight as an able man could carry, over 75 pounds.



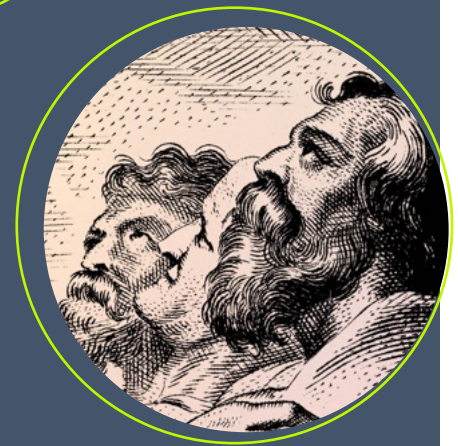
Expressed in today's value, an ounce of gold is worth \$1,800 USD, so one talent of gold would be worth over \$2,000,000. We are not talking about a trifling investment here. The central point of the parable is that Jesus is calling upon us to take risks in His behalf. The over-arching theme of this parable is that God has made a significant investment in each one of us.

It's clear from this passage that Jesus expects a return on His investments, that He has a high tolerance for risk, and that He does not suffer “faint-heartedness” or cowering as excuses for underperformance. Playing it safe is not an alternative. “I gave you something and I expect something back,” is the message. There will be an accounting. Take note that the antagonist in the story was not the wasteful consumer, an epicurean carnalist, or the phlegmatic fool, but an individual who, frozen by fear of having to give account, chose inaction.

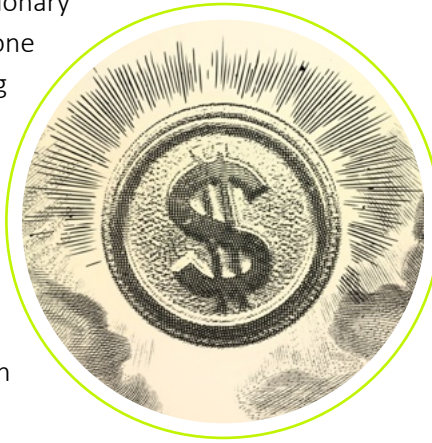
“I know you have high standards and hate careless ways, that you demand the best and make no allowances for error. I was afraid I might disappoint you, so I found a good hiding place and secured your money.”

The rationale of inertia and torpor do not pass muster, i.e., “I know your standards are high, that you don't tolerate wimpy excuses, so I buried what you gave me under a rock.” This excuse points to a core problem of the soul: an unwillingness to take responsibility for our lives. We all know people who nurture a “willful unwillingness,” opting to claim victimization by circumstance, shifting blame to some person or set of events—all designed to excuse their inaction and indolence. The withdrawing, retreating soul will choose anything but taking responsibility for playing the hand that was dealt to them. Languor is the state they choose, not because they are prevented but because they prevent themselves.

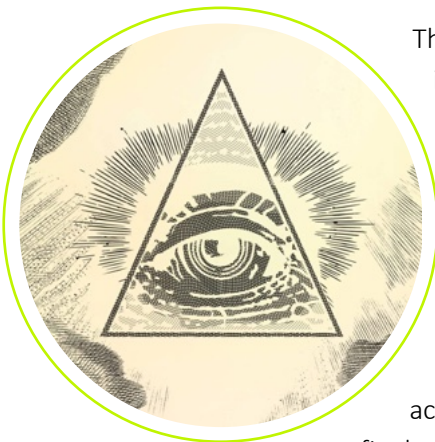
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This story indicates that God will hold us all responsible for what we do with what we are given. God expects a return on what He has given us; the insights, the opportunities, the skills and, yes, the talents (modern meaning). He expects that we would direct our energies into efforts that help others, that we would direct our affections into relationships where we can make a difference—that we would direct some of our discretionary resources toward benefiting someone other than ourselves. The underlying theme in this story is that we are working in someone else's behalf. This awareness drives us to climb mountains in our life that we might otherwise avoid, to take on the impossible and improbable, and to persist in helping those in need—with no regard for the obstacles.

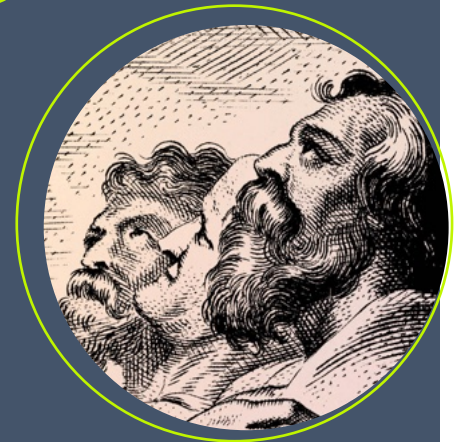


If our life vision is limited to material expansion, climbing rungs of success, vain pursuits and outdoing a brother-in-law, I suggest that it will not be a pleasant accounting. Suppose you received word of an IRS audit coming your way. I have endured this experience...and it is as unpleasant as you would expect. There is the stress of locating all your financial receipts for the past few years (which we did a good job of keeping) and the stress of explaining the deductions you used to an agent whose tone and presence presumes foul play. The initial statement from the IRS told us that we owed them an additional \$2,000 or so. Our accountant informed us that the IRS was incorrect and gave us the necessary proof to demonstrate the point. The auditor acknowledged our accountant's rebuttal and then said, "But I have found another place over here where we have determined you are wrong, and you owe us \$1,976."



The agent was going to get what he intended to collect—whether or not the rationalization for collecting the money was just or not. His job was to collect, and he had a number in mind, evidence be damned. He was going to acquire that number. Although there will be no tyrannical methods for collection at the eternal accounting, there will be an audit—a final reckoning based on Jesus' teachings. In John 12 he is recorded saying, "The words that I have spoken will judge him on the last day." I suspect that this reckoning will, in some

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fashion, weigh the role money played in our decisions and the impact that money had on our relationships with others. We will all be giving an account. From the New Testament I can find at least three arenas for potential audit:

How much return God receives from the investment He has made in our lives.

The relationship between our priorities and His plans for us.

Our faithfulness in the smaller, monetary matters and the impact of that integrity, or lack thereof on our character and destiny.

Prioritization and the Moveable Feast

“A certain man was preparing a great banquet and invited many guests. At the time of the banquet, he sent his servant to tell those who had been invited, ‘Come, for everything is now ready.’”

But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said, ‘I have just bought a field, and I must go and see it. Please excuse me.’

‘Another said, ‘I have just bought five yoke of oxen, and I’m on my way to try them out. Please excuse me.’

Still another said, ‘I just got married, so I can’t come.’

The servant came back and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry and ordered his servant, ‘Go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame.’

‘Sir,’ the servant said, ‘what you ordered has been done, but there is still room.’

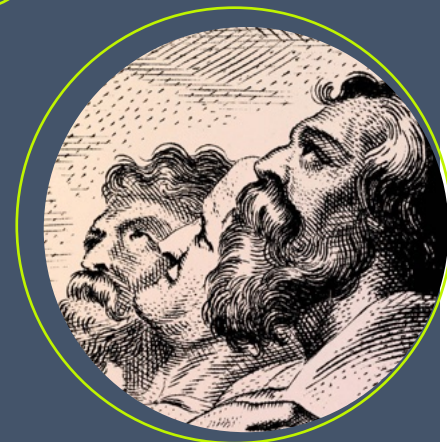
Then the master told his servant, ‘Go out to the roads and country lanes and make them come in, so that my house will be full. I tell you, not one of those men who were invited will get a taste of my banquet.’”

With all the concerns of life and business, Jesus chief difficulty appears to lie in keeping people’s attention. So many things to do and people to see—and money is seated at the head of the table of distractions. The feast represents the kind of life that one could live with Jesus at the center—a life of contentment, of being fulfilled, of being attuned to a divine order, and of being in fellowship with those who appreciate and promote that order.

— John 10:10

How ironic it is that chasing abundance becomes the factor that prevents us from living the abundant life? This life is what Jesus refers to as “the feast.” And what does He say it is that keeps most

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of us from the feast? Manifold money matters. A modern update of the excuses for not attending the feast might read:

“I bought a condo and I’ve got to go make renovation plans.”

“I just bought a hybrid SUV and want to take it for a test drive.”

“I just got promoted and really need to prove myself.”

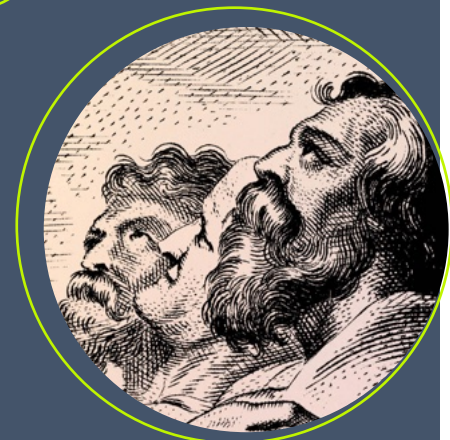
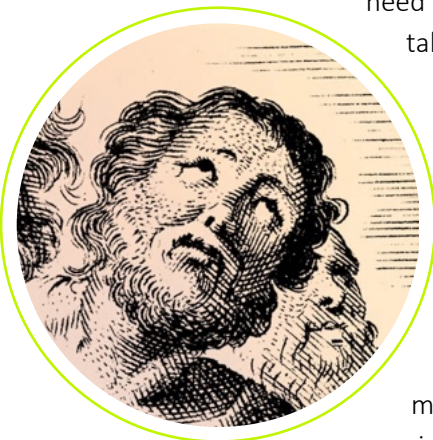
“I just got married and won’t be available for the next few decades.”

Busyness and endless activity without reflection are our spiritual ball-and-chain. How often and how easily we fall into the pace of putting out fires, checking off items on never-ending lists, and acting out whirling dervish lifestyles? We are accomplishing a lot—but for what? As Steven Covey put it, “Why climb a ladder of success if it’s leaning against the wrong wall.” Having a sense of prioritization in our lives requires pulling away from the activity treadmill to a quieter place where we can measure the cadence of our lives against the fulfillment that this pace brings. If our pace is enervating—is draining us—there is a chance that either the pace is too swift or that the activities are missing the point (or both).

I don’t think Jesus was saying that there is something inherently wrong with checking out the new land or transportation you purchased or attending to your spouse. He was intimating that you’ve got to be able to recognize when something more important comes along. If all we ever hear is “opportunity knocking” we may miss the whispers of life’s most precious moments. We must guard against the ever-lasting bowing to the never-lasting. Anyone who has ever missed a kid’s recital for a business deal that ended up going nowhere knows what I’m talking about.

The greater matters in life are justice, mercy, and humility. We will need to take time out for these matters. It takes time to address injustices and to help those who have been wronged. It takes time to meet others’ needs, to feed the hungry, to visit the lonely, and to comfort the afflicted. It takes time to reflect on how fortunate we are to have the people we have in our lives.

When we take the time for these great matters, our life is a “moveable feast.” You are invited to come at any time. Trust me, there are many seats available.



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