

Radical Investment Strategy

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Binkley Baptist Church, Chapel Hill NC
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Matthew 25: 14-46

I.

Just what is a **talent**? A word that gets used a lot for one thing: talent scout, talented musician, a talent for.... As we usually use the word, it means something we do well, naturally, a kind of strength. But in Jesus' day talent meant and this is the technical definition: "a whole mess of money." OK, well, it turns out a talent was actually a unit of weight measurement- equaling the weight of a large container of water. In the Roman Empire, the term seems to have varied a lot from place to place, but each "talent" in our story may have been as much as 130 pounds of gold coin. We are talking pots of gold.

So in this very room we have some of us with talents, and then again there are also some with... talents.

Take a trip with me a couple of thousand years, to a troubled corner of the world. Back in that day, Jesus of Nazareth told a rather harsh story about a cruel and wealthy owner and three of his top investors. To understand the story as it's received in Matthew's gospel, it is helpful to remember that in ancient times slaves could themselves handle the wealth of others, could rise, in their slavery, to be rather powerful people...while remaining slaves. Sometimes I wonder if so much has changed. After all, there are a number of ways we may be held in servitude.

II.

To keep it fresh, let's try to tell this story all over again, in ways closer to home. I apologize to the Click and Clack brothers for borrowing some names from their show.

Once upon a time, not so long ago, there was a fabulously wealthy person, a woman of style and power and pretty far-reaching investments. She had a whole raft of people she could go to for assistance handling her money. But among them she had three young investment specialists working for her with different levels of... talent.

Now one morning as she awoke, this woman made two important decisions. The first was travel decision and the second was an investment decision. She was overdue for an extended Caribbean vacation in the vicinity of the Caymans. There had been some little banking irregularity, and it seemed like a good time to take a break far far away, just to clear the mind. But she had all this money that needed to be reinvested. And she wanted a diverse portfolio.

That morning she called the three money managers into her penthouse office, and sat them down... "Dewey" she said, "Cheatham, and Howe! I'm going out of town for a few months where I can't be reached too easily. Never mind where. Dewey, there's a portfolio of fifty million I want you to handle while I'm gone. And Ms. Cheatham! This chunk has a mere twenty. Think you can handle that? Oh, and Mr. Howe, I almost forgot you! " She pulled a third file folder off her desk, thinner than the other two. "Ten million. See you don't spend it all at once. Even you should be able to handle ten. I want a full report when I'm back from where I am going. It's in cash." With that she strolled out of the office leaving them... open-mouthed and interested.

Time passes quickly when you have fifty million to play with. William Dewey saw a good opportunity in stock that had just gone on the market, and put it all in there. He had an inside tip and thought he'd make a bundle. As soon as the stock had doubled in value from its initial price, after a few months, not being greedy he sold it, and put the money in pharmaceutical stock and health insurance companies.

The second investor, Samantha Cheatham, with her mere twenty million, was a bit nervous, but had heard about a remarkable real estate market that was doing well. Of course with some beginner's luck, she too had made a bundle by the time a few months had passed, and got that money out of there while the getting was good, just before the bubble popped. She doubled her quantity to forty million.

Poor Howard Howe. He had thought he had the nerve to get into speculative investments, but ten million dollars was more than he could handle emotionally. He thought about just putting it in a bank account, but even that seemed too risky.

After the first ten sleepless nights, Howe was starting to lose perspective. He actually took it all home, a burdensome proposition, indeed. Where do you put ten million? To hide that much under the floorboards would

mean tearing up all the hardwood. In the middle of the night he went out in the backyard and dug a deep hole, and buried the money.

It wasn't long before the months had passed. Things had blown over on the insider trading issues and that silly bank scandal, and our investor friend was back in town, to meet with her three slaves...I mean employees. They stood in that gorgeous well-lit office again, as in turn each reported his or her success.

"Well done, Dewey...I'm giving you this office. Enter into my joy. Oh, and Cheatham, I'm quite pleased..." Finally Howe stood before her, looking a tad dusty! He had a worn oversized duffel bag, all covered in grime, in his right hand, bulging with what looked like big bills, and another in his left. "It's all still here" he muttered. "I hid it well." The investor was stunned into silence for a moment. Then she got that very cold look in her eye. "How dare you waste my time and money!" she snarled.

Howe had the poor judgment to try to speak back. Without enough sleep, his choice of words was poor. "I knew you were greedy and interested only in your own success. I know how you've built up your wealth, walking over others! So I decided I couldn't dare to lose a penny."

"If you knew I was so bad," she said, "and I am, then you knew I wanted something back for my troubles. You're fired. Maybe you can get a job working for the government."

III.

Now God is not some ruthless investor, and Jesus was not saying we should be speculators with others' money. In fact Jesus makes this very clear, when we read the next paragraph. When the *day of reckoning* that you worry about comes, he tells them, God will bring a different set of standards for separating the good from the bad. The good shepherd will select the sheep, the people who offered hospitality to a stranger, gave food to a hungry person, not the goats, those who only looked out for number one, and for their own. In other words, God is not interested in selfish gain. But God is interested! God is interested in an unstinting spiritual and material investment in our neighbor. God wants us to do as well by our neighbor and by creation—a double return—as the unscrupulous investors did by their cruel master.

The wealth we have may be limited or it may be huge, but we are called to a radically different investment policy than the folk in our story. But one aspect at least there is in common with what those slaves did with their harsh master's funds. God calls us to be just as risky, just as breathtakingly adventurous, with investing the bounty of God's love and grace, as the worst speculators are, with investing or gambling a rather different kind of wealth. If the children of this world can do it with the products of materialism, why can't the children of God's mercy do it with the rich harvest of Christ's love? Each of us has one life to live, real gifts, real assets to invest. Where are we going to put our wealth?

In this season when as a church family we reflect on our giving patterns, as we make decisions for the coming year about how we intend to invest some talents, and yes that means pots of money too, it makes sense to take a good hard look at the way in which we give, as inseparable from the quality and the courage and the nerve of our lives of faith. And it makes sense to take a good hard look at how fully we are willing to take some chances with what God has given us to work with.

To put it bluntly, the question scripture presses us to ask is whether we are investing our wealth and our gifts in sharing love and mercy with our world, with our neighbors, or if, on the other hand, we are hiding a few talents in the hole in our backyard. To take the financial question, to heart, it also asks us if we are putting our money to work collectively and individually in a way that has a multiplier effect in people's lives, in our wider community, in our world.

People of faith can be found in big offices and on street corners. Followers of Jesus can be found in boardrooms and in kitchens. But wherever we are found the questions is the same. What have you done with the gift of love that God has entrusted you? Have you taken a chance for the sake of mercy lately? Have you put it on the line for the sake of divine justice in the last few days? Have you put it on the line for the cause of healing and reconciliation?

The reward for faithful investing for the follower of Jesus isn't found often in material gain. It is found in the simple satisfaction of knowing we haven't buried it in the ground. And it is found in the knowledge that God will provide a healthy return, for the life put on the line, for the sake of Love. I invite you to this investment strategy: a different measure of total return.