

# Holy Textures

Meeting Jesus in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.  
Short, easy to use, faith-provoking insights.

## Matthew 25:14-30

*This a Wisdom parable teaching us about the perils and difficulties of the ways of the world until the Kingdom comes. It warns us to continue to expect the rich to steal from the poor; and for the followers of Jesus to expect to be punished by the rich for behaving honourably - burying the ill-gotten wealth and refusing to use it to take even more from the poor.*

### Year A

#### Pentecost 22

#### November 13, 2011

*Sunday Between November 13 and November 19 Inclusive*

*Proper 28, Ordinary Time 33*

*USA Thanksgiving is fourth Thursday, November 22 - 28. May be celebrated Sunday between November 18 and November 24 inclusive. See [Luke 17:11-19](#) for Thanksgiving commentary.*

Read the passage at the bottom of this post: [Matthew 25:14-30, The Message](#) or [Matthew 25:14-30, The New Revised Standard Version \(NRSV\)](#).

Click here, [Matthew 25:14-30](#), for an easy to print or email Adobe PDF version of this note.

Sermon by the [Rev. Dr. George Hermanson](#), "[A Kingdom of Surprises](#)."

Chapters 24 and 25 of Matthew are considered by scholars to be the last of 5 "discourses" (i.e., long sections of teachings by Jesus). It is hypothesized that these 5 sections are intended by Matthew to be a new Torah - a new set of 5 "books" paralleling the 5 books of the Torah attributed to Moses: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.

The implication of this for present day understanding is that this final section has been significantly edited by Matthew to fit his intentions. Today's text is a case in point.

The themes of chapters 24 and 25 are: final judgment and the return of the Son of Man, or, the establishing of the reign of God on earth; and teachings about delays. These two issues were certainly of high concern to Matthew and his community. Scholars debate how much they were top-of-mind for Jesus. Thus the scholarly debate about how much Matthew used - and changed - anything Jesus might have actually said to address concerns that arose only after Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension.

How might this parable have sounded to the peasants who were Jesus' followers?

First, they would not see themselves as any of the characters in the story. They certainly were not "masters," nor were they even the slaves of a master.

Second, they would have been well aware that it was against the law of Moses to charge interest. And, they would remember that when the twelve tribes entered the Promised Land, the "promise" was that every

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family would receive and hold a share of that land - **FOREVER**. Therefore, those who had gotten rich, did so by stealing land that rightly belonged to others. This understanding of the rich is shown in **Verse 26**:

*I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter.*

In other words, the rich get rich by stealing what belongs to others.

Third, for the followers of Jesus, the slave who buried the talent was doing the honourable thing. He was not using the wealth to steal even more. He was protecting his master's wealth in the safest way possible.

Fourth, notice that this parable does **NOT** begin, "the Kingdom of heaven is like ..." In fact, the opening two words in Verse 14 are variously translated:

- "For it is as if" (New Revised Standard Version)
- "Again, it will be like" (New International Version)
- "It's also like" (The Message)

But what exactly is the "it" that the following parable is like? Does the "it" refer to the Kingdom of Heaven (i.e. referring to the subject in Verse 1); or does the "it" refer to the delay of the coming of the Kingdom (i.e., referring to the subject in Verse 13)?

In Luke 19, this story is told following the story of Zacchaeus - a rich man who changes his evil ways! Surely this is a sign that the Kingdom is eminently at hand? Verse 11 then gives this introduction to the parable:

*(Jesus) went on to tell a parable, because he was near Jerusalem, and because they supposed that the Kingdom of God was to appear immediately.*

I take it that Luke intends us to hear this parable **NOT** as a teaching about the Kingdom, but as a caution against thinking that the Kingdom was coming immediately. And so, similarly, the "it" in Matthew 25:14 refers to the subject in the previous verse 13:

*Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour (when the Kingdom of Heaven will arrive).*

The parable of the talents then is **NOT** intended to be an introductory lesson how the Kingdom of Heaven is like modern Western capitalism - extolling using wealth to make even more wealth.

As my friend George Hermanson puts it in his sermon, A Kingdom of Surprises, the servant who buries the talents acts as a whistle-blower. He takes a very public action that draws attention to the injustice that has come to be taken as "business as usual."

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Burying the talents is a classic piece of non-violent resistance: the servant does nothing to harm anyone, but he makes a public act of refusing to participate in the unjust system of acquiring wealth for the few by impoverishing the many.

The master's wrath is the response of an elite who has been publicly shamed by one of lower status.

It is highly ironical - to say the least - that the master's words to the servant have been taken by the church to be Jesus' words, and have been used to continue to support the very practices that the parable condemns.

I believe this is **NOT** a "Kingdom" parable; it is a "Wisdom" parable teaching us about the perils and difficulties of the ways of the world until the Kingdom comes. It warns us to continue to expect the rich to steal from the poor; and for the followers of Jesus to expect to be punished by the rich for behaving honourably. (So much for all the stewardship sermons I have preached using this text!)

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Historical background information in this post is drawn primarily from Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels, see link below, pages 124-125.

\* [Link to Amazon.com Bibliography for Bruce Malina, et. al.](#), Social Science Commentary on ... The Synoptic Gospels; The Gospel of John; The Book of Acts; The Letters of Paul; The Book of Revelation; and others.

## Matthew 25:14-30 (NRSV)

<sup>14</sup> "For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; <sup>15</sup> to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. <sup>16</sup> The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. <sup>17</sup> In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. <sup>18</sup> But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money. <sup>19</sup> After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. <sup>20</sup> Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, 'Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents.' <sup>21</sup> His master said to him, 'Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.' <sup>22</sup> And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, 'Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents.' <sup>23</sup> His master said to him, 'Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.' <sup>24</sup> Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, 'Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; <sup>25</sup> so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.' <sup>26</sup> But his master

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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?'<sup>27</sup> Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest.<sup>28</sup> So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents.<sup>29</sup> For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away.<sup>30</sup> As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

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## Matthew 25:14-30 (The Message)

<sup>14</sup> "It's also like a man going off on an extended trip. He called his servants together and delegated responsibilities.<sup>15</sup> To one he gave five thousand dollars, to another two thousand, to a third one thousand, depending on their abilities. Then he left.<sup>16</sup> Right off, the first servant went to work and doubled his master's investment.<sup>17</sup> The second did the same.<sup>18</sup> But the man with the single thousand dug a hole and carefully buried his master's money.

<sup>19</sup> "After a long absence, the master of those three servants came back and settled up with them.<sup>20</sup> The one given five thousand dollars showed him how he had doubled his investment.<sup>21</sup> His master commended him: 'Good work! You did your job well. From now on be my partner.'

<sup>22</sup> "The servant with the two thousand showed how he also had doubled his master's investment.<sup>23</sup> His master commended him: 'Good work! You did your job well. From now on be my partner.'

<sup>24</sup> "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.'<sup>25</sup> 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.'

<sup>26</sup> "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?'<sup>27</sup> 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.

<sup>28-29</sup> " '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.'<sup>30</sup> Throw him out into utter darkness.'

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