

CHAPTER XXIII

OPPORTUNITY, FIDELITY, AND REWARD

THE PARABLE OF THE TALENTS

"For it is as when a man, going into another country, called his own servants, and delivered unto them his goods. And unto one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one; to each according to his several ability; and he went on his journey. Straightway he that received the five talents went and traded with them, and made other five talents. In like manner he also that received the two gained other two. But he that received the one went away and digged in the earth, and hid his lord's money. Now after a long time the lord of those servants cometh, and maketh a reckoning with them. And he that received the five talents came and brought other five talents, saying, Lord, thou deliveredst unto me five talents: lo, I have gained other five talents. His lord said unto him, Well done, good and faithful servant: thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will set thee over many things; enter thou into the joy of thy lord. And he also that received the two talents came and said, Lord, thou deliveredst unto me two talents: lo, I have gained other two talents. His lord said unto him, Well done, good and faithful servant: thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will set thee over many things; enter thou into the joy of thy lord. And he also that had received the one talent came and said, Lord, I knew thee that thou art a hard man, reaping where thou didst not sow, and gathering where thou didst not scatter; and I was afraid and went away and hid thy talent in the earth: lo, thou hast thine own. But his lord answered and said unto him, Thou wicked and slothful servant, thou knewest that I reap where I sowed not, and gather where I did not scatter; thou oughtest therefore to have put my money to the bankers, and at my coming I should have received back mine own with interest. Take ye away therefore the talent from him, and give it unto him that hath ten talents. For unto every one that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundance: but from him that hath not, even that which he hath shall be taken away. And cast ye out the unprofitable servant into the outer darkness: there shall be the weeping and the gnashing of teeth."

(Matthew 25: 14-30)

(Parallel passage: Luke 19: 11-27, being The Parable of the Pounds)

CHAPTER XXIII

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The Parable of the Talents *The Parable of the Pounds*

Jesus daringly predicted that though heaven and earth might dissolve His words would still live.¹ He believed His message to be indestructible; and history as it unfolds is His vindication. His dicta originally spoken to few, "not many wise, not many mighty,"² are now pondered by the race. Each succeeding generation brings its tribute to His authority.

This parable of the Talents is evidence. Great men have felt in it the spear-thrust of truth. Carlyle thundered it as a Sinai-law of life: ". . . this is the question of questions: What talent is born in you? How do you employ that?"³ Dr. Johnson prayed—a gentle modesty indwelling his strength—"that when I shall render up at the last day an account of the talent committed to me, I may receive pardon for the sake of Jesus Christ."³ Macaulay remarked that this parable has given to the language a new adjective, "talented."³ Robert Louis Stevenson, addressing the Samoan chiefs at the opening of that road which from love for him they had built to the door of his Samoan house, reminded them that the true champion of Samoa was not the man of barbarous customs who made a constant havoc of war but "the man who makes good roads . . . and is a profitable servant before the Lord, using and improving that great talent that has been given him in trust." Instances of the convincing power of the parable might be multiplied. With good warrant did Jesus once prophesy: "My words shall not pass away."

In His day provincial rulers would journey to Rome at the

¹ Matthew 24: 35.

² I Corinthians 1: 26.

³ Quoted in the "Expositor's Dictionary of Texts," pp. 948 ff.

accession of a new emperor to crave continuance of their rights.⁴ Sometimes the subjects of the subordinate monarch would make counter plea that their ruler be deposed. Herod, the Great, thus sought the favor first of Mark Antony and later of Augustus. Archelaus, Herod's son, prayed Augustus to grant him the paternal sovereignty and he was made Ethnarch of Judea despite the protest of a deputation of fifty representative Jews. The servants left in charge of affairs during the absence of their king on such an errand needed all the faithfulness they could muster.⁵ Such faithfulness found ample test in the hostility of the populace. If their lord should be deposed loyalty to him might cost them their lives. But if they were unfaithful and their lord returned—well, rulers of that time were none too lenient with unfaithful servants! Augustus gave the kingdom back to Herod because Herod was intelligent and energetic, but he yet said of him that he would feel safer as Herod's pig than as his son! It is on such a "page of contemporary history" that Luke has grafted the story of the talents. Or perhaps we should say that Jesus Himself originally gave that setting to His parable.⁶

⁴ See the chapter on "The Talents" in the book, "The Pilgrim," by Dr. T. R. Glover. This is easily the most stimulating study of the parable which I have read, and I hasten to acknowledge gratefully my indebtedness.

⁵ The Lucan version in its context (Luke 19: 11) hints an eschatological reference in the words "into a far country." Dr. Plummer ("I.C.C.," *ad loc.*), seems to accept this as the main reference of the parable. Dr. Bruce agrees with earlier commentators that the story has a "veiled reference to the present and future fortunes of Jesus." But Loisy has denied any reference to the Parousia, and George Murray (*op. cit.*, p. 275) believes the eschatological coloring was supplied by the redactors. This is not the place to discuss doctrines of the "Second Coming." Suffice it to say that Jesus did not return in the flesh as the early Church hoped and believed. Despite the failure of that hope the parable has its abiding truth, which this chapter seeks to propound.

⁶ The vexed problem of the relationship between the parables of the Talents and of the Pounds cannot be evaded. Many scholars believe that both sprang originally from a common source, and most of these hold also that Matthew's form is closer to the original. Dr. W. C. Allen ("I.C.C.," on Matthew), Dr. A. J. Grieve (Peake's Commentary), Dr. Marcus Dods (*op. cit.*), and George Murray (*op. cit.*) identify the two parables at least as to their source, and Dr. W. F. Adeney (Century Commentary on Luke) and Dr. A. Plummer ("I.C.C." on Luke) admit strong likenesses. The teaching of the two stories is similar, though *prima facie* not identical. The general viewpoint of these commentators harks back to Unger, Bleek, Ewald, Meyer, and Strauss. The latter (in "Leben Jesu") pointed out that the Lucan version is inconsistent in its reference first to "servants" and then to "citizens," and in recording actions appropriate now to a "king" and now to a "trader" or "householder." He further suggested that Luke 19: 12, 14, 15, 27, with slight alterations and arranged in sequence, form the nucleus of another parable of "The Rebellious Citizens."

The views of opposing commentators may be summarized as follows: G. H. Hubbard (*op. cit.*) following Alexander Maclaren ("Expositions") and J. Monro Gibson ("Expositor's Bible") maintains that the two parables present not an identical or a different teaching but "diverse aspects of a kindred truth." In effect these

There were three servants. One received five talents with which to trade. He followed the market closely, knew the prospects of the crops, anticipated the arrival of caravans from Damascus, marked the movement of troops, and on the information thus gleaned he invested his five talents so shrewdly that he realized a profit of one hundred percent on his transactions. Another servant was entrusted with two talents. He was, we may suppose, a blunt and honest man with none of the finesse and mental quickness of his more talented neighbor. He plodded away at his task. If his money was invested in farming, he drove his oxen hard. If a vineyard was his to tend, he pruned or tied or gathered diligently, working from sunrise to sundown. So by the sheer fidelity of toil he made his two talents yield four. The third servant was of a different stripe. He hid his one talent in the ground. The action, as judged by the standards of that day, was not lazy. To hide money in the ground was the traditional way of saving money. Commentators have dwelt at length on the "apology" which this third servant offered for his negligence. But his explanation was not an apology. He had read his lord's character with discernment. He knew him to be of the Herod type, "reaping where thou didst not sow." He was afraid, and—"lo, thou

scholars accept the parables at their face value. Their interest is almost exclusively that of expositors rather than exegetes. G. H. Hubbard says explicitly (*op. cit.*, p. xviii), "we must cast aside . . . the microscopical analysis of grammar and lexicon, the massive enginery of scientific and historical study"—a demand with which we can sympathize so long as we remember that sound interpretation rests ultimately on exegetical fact. Trench and Arnot earlier held the traditional view. (Trench, *op. cit.*, p. 270 ff., and Arnot, *op. cit.*, p. 521 footnote.) They contend that the two parables were spoken under different circumstances, and that Luke's seeming inconsistency is due to the fact that Jesus was addressing two groups of hearers—His own disciples corresponding to "servants" and the multitude corresponding to the hostile "citizens." A. B. Bruce (*op. cit.*), agrees and further pleads that the smallness of the entrusted sum as coming from a king—"one talent" in the Lucan account—is understandable since Jesus was a poverty-stricken king! Such argument is not convincing. It is built on the unproved assumption that Jesus regarded Himself as filling the main rôle in the parable, and it requires our belief that Jesus in telling a story alternated almost sentence by sentence in addressing two different groups of hearers—a hazardous and unlikely feat in homiletics! We are inclined to believe that Luke (quite permissibly and even brilliantly) grafted Matthew's parable onto a "king and citizens" setting, or that Jesus originally gave the story that setting and that Matthew's version, at least so far as the substance of the teaching is concerned, is the original.

⁷ G. H. Hubbard, among others, makes much of the third servant's "apology" (*op. cit.*, p. 184). Marcus Dods (*op. cit.*, p. 225) stresses the man's "wrong view of God." But the man probably considered himself virtuous in safeguarding the entrusted talent, and it is likely that he was not much mistaken in his estimate of his lord's character. That character is not to be pressed in our thoughts as closely related to a conception of God. It has only an *ad hominem* significance; it is a natural feature of the historical setting of the story.

hast thine own." He made no excuse, for he did not consider himself guilty of any neglect. He had kept his talent with most scrupulous care. Too scrupulous care! That was his crime! He would have proved himself more of a man had he planned and risked and lost!

Such was the story. It drew daringly on Judean politics for its background. If to-day it stabs wide awake our unexamined lives we may well believe that when first it was told it struck home with a point of truth exceeding sharp.

"Unto one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one; to each according to his several ability"—a clear and sober statement of the inequality of human endowment. The findings of the intelligence testers are not new: they were succinctly expressed long ago in this story. We are thrust onto this swinging ball called "earth" without our knowledge or consent. We are not consulted as to our equipment of body and spirit. On reaching years of maturity we begin to realize (with some heartburning, perhaps) that certain gifts and graces are ours within measure and that certain others have been denied us. Shakespeare has five talents in literature, Michelangelo five in art, Savonarola five in preaching, and Edison five in invention. These are the bright particular stars in the human firmament. The vast majority have two talents. They are the useful hosts of mediocrity. Then there are those who seem limited and handicapped—the one-talent people. "All men are created equal" in the sense that God intends that every man shall have an equal chance to prove himself, but the historic statement when taken at its face value is not defensible. For we are unequal in native gift—one man a Shakespeare and another always a hack-writer. We are unequal in opportunity—one man moving in that "fierce light which beats upon a throne," and another living out his lonely days as a trapper in far woods. We are unequal in advantages—one born in poverty and another given an education as a matter of course. All men are created unequal. . . .

But, lest God should be made a "respector of persons," certain counter-balancing truths have been scored into the parable.⁸

⁸ I cannot feel that the teaching of the two parables (the Pounds and the Talents) is very different. In the parable of the Pounds each man receives one talent.

The five-talent man is evidently expected to produce five talents more if he would satisfy his lord. The two-talent man has discharged his duty if he can produce but two. The one-talent man does not fail of his lord's "well-done" if he can show one other talent for his labor. The one-talent man is not required to realize five talents on his scanty capital, neither can the five-talent man escape the curse if he presents one, or two, or four. A talent is evidently like any other coin: it has two sides. On one side is written "endowment," and on the other "responsibility." To the measure in which a man is gifted, to that same measure is he accountable. Fatuously we covet our neighbor's one hundred talents—as if we could have his talents without his obligation! With every load of jewels there is delivered a load of care. Our gifts are not detachable from their commensurate burden.

Again, it must be noted, lest Heaven be charged with a gross favoritism, that the story represents every man as having some talent. No one is left empty-handed. Every one is in some regard "talented," and a talent is no small sum! Who knows but that in the economy of God a man with one talent may not quicken the earth more than his neighbor with five? Such a truth is more than hinted, but meanwhile this is explicitly stated:

"To each man is given a day and his work for the day;
And once, and no more, he is given to travel this way."⁹

There is a deeper fact to quiet forever any charge that heaven is unfair. The reward of the five-talent man was his lord's commendation: "Well done, good and faithful servant: thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many. Enter thou into the joy of thy lord." The kingdom of ten cities or five was not the essence of the recompense; the true satisfaction was the master's approval. The

Endowment is equal. But granted that the talent in question may be "the word of the Kingdom," as various commentators have suggested, the fact of human inequality cannot be overruled. I am inclined to think that the man who made five talents from his one was not less faithful than his neighbor who made ten talents (as G. H. Hubbard has suggested) but simply less gifted. He received only five cities for his sovereignty as compared with his neighbor's ten because he was less capable, not because he was less dear in the esteem of his lord. (See Luke 19: 16-19.)

⁹ Edwin Markham, "The Day and the Work" ("Gates of Paradise," The Macmillan Co.).

cities were small amends compared with the king's acknowledgment of kingliness in them! It is significant therefore that the commendation of the two-talent man is in identical language with that spoken to his more gifted brother.¹⁰ Not a word is changed, not an accent of the voice is different. Thus we are introduced to a new system of measurements. There is a widow-woman in the portrait gallery of the Gospels who cast a farthing into the Temple treasury and of whom Jesus said that she gave "more than they all together."¹¹ By what reckoning did Jesus arrive at such an estimate? Judging her gift by monetary value she gave less than anybody. Judging it by love-value she gave more than the total gifts of all the other worshippers. So in computing success Jesus has His own revolutionary standards. The question is not, "How many talents have you earned?" but rather, "How many, compared with the number entrusted to you?" The demand is not, "What treasure?" but rather, "What faithfulness?" Surely the judgments of heaven are without a flaw! There is no penalty for poverty of endowment, and no acclaim for excess of gifts. Instead there is a scrutiny which searches life not for fame but for enterprise of fidelity, not for genius but for goodness: "Well done, *good* and *faithful* servant."

An impressive incident is told about the death of David Livingstone.¹² When he was buried in Westminster Abbey many eyes were fixed on the Negro who stood at the head of the casket. This was the Zanzibar servant who had brought his master's body from the African swamp, asking as his only recompense that he might attend it on its sad journey across the sea. In the matter of talents two men could hardly have lived in greater contrast. Livingstone was passing rich in talents—in medical skill, in charm of nature, in vision of a

¹⁰ It must be acknowledged that in the Lucan account the words of commendation in the respective cases do differ. This is the justification (and about the only justification, so far as we can see) for the view advanced by G. H. Hubbard and others that the second servant is represented in the Lucan story as being a man of only passable integrity and industry. It is too flimsy a basis (especially in the light of our recent knowledge of the synoptic problem) on which to build a distinction when so many signs point to similarity.

¹¹ Mark 12: 41, Luke 21: 2. The meaning of "more than they all" seems by the original to be as here represented.

¹² As related in Luke S. Walmsley's, "Fighters and Martyrs for the Freedom of Faith," pp. 508, 512

friendly world washed white. The negro slave had but one talent—his mind dense, his color a curse (since white people will hate a man for the color of his skin), his only gift to look up and follow like a faithful dog. But the two—how unequal in grace!—were one in courage of faithfulness, and therefore brothers in the approval of their common Lord.

But the main rôle of the parable is acted by the man with one talent. The story is told for his sake. His portrait is drawn with elaborate care. His two fellow servants are sketched in strong lines as becomes their clear-cut character, but this man is painted with sharp detail; and as the story advances, he occupies the bold center of the picture. He is not a bad man. He is not drunken nor wasteful. He is not lacking in a sense of responsibility, or he would have squandered his talent. He is something of a judge of character, for he has described an oriental ruler to the life—though his expectation that such a ruler would tolerate his safety-tactics shows that his judgment of character was not carried to a conclusion. What was wrong with him? He lacked imagination (the kind of imagination that a man may cultivate) and he failed in courage!

He did not see that his talent was needed. The ruler is depicted by Jesus as caught in overpowering wrath because one talent was not used. Fourteen talents in all had already been proffered, but his anger knew no bounds because one talent had been allowed to rust. The anger of the story is not hollow melodrama; it proclaims the verity that every talent is needed in the divine economy. In the Sancta Sophia men of many talents were needed to conceive and fashion the vast span of arch and dome. Only fingers rarely skilled and minds rarely beautiful could have set the porphyry and mosaic. But hands equally faithful (though less subtle) were required to dig the foundation and lay the masonry. When every man's gift is *necessary* to the rearing of the temple, and the artist depends upon the delver, the distinction between "great" talents and "small" becomes somewhat stupid and illusory. The failure of the one-talent man leaves as bad a blotch as if the ten-talent man had been treacherous. It is the one vote which will ulti-

mately redeem politics, and the single voice which will ultimately make a world's insistence on peace. . . .

"There is waiting a work where only your hands can avail;
And so if you falter, a chord in the music will fail."¹³

This man lacked imagination to see that every talent is precious. He depreciated his gift. One of the many surprises of the message of Jesus is His constant insistence on the worth of what others call "obscure" service. He spoke of the crucial importance of a "cup of cold water"¹⁴ given in love. He declared that not "one jot" of the law should pass away.¹⁵ He insisted that to feed the hungry or to visit the prisoner, was a deed of cosmic and eternal significance.¹⁶ He gave warning repeatedly that it is not in human wisdom to know when a deed is "great" or "small"; that hidden fragrances of the spirit may give a "small" action the smell of a sweet savor to the end of time. The widow-woman casting her mite into the treasury and the unknown Simeon carrying a Cross have glorified the race immeasurably more than the pride of Herod and the wisdom of Gamaliel. But the one-talent man, succumbing to the one-talent temptation, was blind to everything except life's surface.

His worst fault, however, was that he lacked the courage of adventure. This is the crux of the story. He shrank from risk, though he could have known that nothing is gained without risk. The universe is amazingly fruitful for talents. In a few years five can become ten. It multiplies talents as a harvest multiplies seed. On the other hand, the universe is amazingly *fatal* for talents. If neglected, if unriskened, they vanish. Hiding them in the ground will not save them; they rot! Power used with discretion and adventure is increased power; power left stagnant is seized with paralysis. "Take the talent from him and give it to him that hath ten." It is not a threat, but rather a sober statement of living law. Feed a capacity for music or for sympathy, and it will grow with an ever-

¹³ "The Day and the Work," Edwin Markham. ("Gates of Paradise," The Macmillan Company.)

¹⁴ Matthew 10: 42.

¹⁵ Matthew 5: 18.

¹⁶ Matthew 25: 40.

deeper root. Neglect it, and it will disappear like a wraith. "Take away the talent from him!" Employ the instinct for prayer (for it is an instinct and is proved only as it is obeyed) and soon the skies will be filled with spiritual hosts. Bury the instinct and soon those selfsame skies will be as inert as slag!

"Heaven does with us as we with torches do;
Not light them for ourselves: for if our virtues
Did not go forth of us, 'twere all alike
As if we had them not. Spirits are not finely touched
But to fine issues."¹⁷

The end of the man who will not risk his virtues is torment of conscience, "weeping and gnashing of teeth," and the poor comfort of "outer darkness."¹⁸

This truth we think we recognize. On the page of Scripture we acknowledge it. But in the affairs of the world it is still despised. We wage a war that engulfs half the planet in woe, and we emerge with, "Let's get back to normalcy" (hateful word!) as our only wisdom! "Let us keep our world as it is," we cry. Let us bury our talent and hold it intact. Nothing must be risked. Let us get back to the customary exploitation of the earth's natural resources, the customary inflow of profit on investment, the customary mechanical, killing drabness of the industrial order! "Normalcy" built Pompeii with its fashionable chariots, its prize fights in the guise of gladiatorial combats, its benefactors and its proletariat, its contrasts of poverty and wealth.¹⁹ "Normalcy" built the commercial prosperity of Ostia. It had its trades-union officials (or those who corresponded to them) who doubtless met with employers' representatives to discuss wages and the expulsion of blacklegs. It had its election announcements, its caucuses, its keynote speeches that did not ring true, its party pledges as stable as air. "Normalcy" was there, and "normalcy" was deservedly destroyed beneath volcanic lava. "Normalcy" is the buried talent.

¹⁷ Shakespeare, "Measure for Measure."

¹⁸ Bruce, *op. cit.*, p. 207, quotes Calvin to the effect that feasts were commonly held at night, and that "outer darkness" means a thrusting forth into a night black by contrast with the bright joy of the bridal chamber. It is exquisite imagery neither to be whittled down into a trivial doom, nor to be burdened with a doctrine of eternal damnation.

¹⁹ See an interesting chapter on "The Ages of Faith and the Ages of Reason," in R. J. Campbell's "The War and the Soul."

And we have thought that Jesus was commending merely an industrious and routine virtue! As if He who risked the sublime venture of a Cross could ever bless a staid stagnation! Still we shrink from "dangerous experiments" in industry. Still we content ourselves with an army-and-navy diplomacy. Still we are true to our "traditional policy." Still we bury our talent in the fond hope that it will last, and shrink from the risk in which alone it can live.

But we may be educated, perchance, by violence. Successive "weepings and gnashings of teeth" may finally convince us of the crime and folly—and cowardice—of a buried talent. Then we shall turn to His strong courage Whose words shall not pass. His counsel will still be law when heaven and earth have dissolved like a mist.