

The King and the Stewards



The Gospels of Matthew and Luke both tell the story of a wealthy man who was preparing for an extended absence, and who gave his servants sums of money to manage on his behalf.

He proceeded to tell a parable, because He was near to Jerusalem, and because they supposed

that the kingdom of God was to appear immediately. (Luke 19:11)

Jesus was traveling to Jerusalem for Passover and was only 18 miles away in Jericho. The expectation of the Jewish people was that the Messiah, someone from the lineage of King David who had reigned a thousand years earlier, would be crowned king in Jerusalem. This Messiah would restore the majesty of David's kingdom, ridding Israel of foreign oppressors. When Jesus arrived in Jerusalem, crowds gathered before and behind Him, shouting, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!" They were all expecting that the end of the rule of the hated Romans, the setting up of the kingdom of Israel with the Messiah as king, was just around the corner. Though Jesus had told His disciples that He would be killed in Jerusalem, they didn't understand His meaning, as they had the typical Jewish expectations regarding the Messiah.



He said therefore, "A nobleman went into a far country to receive for himself a kingdom and then return. Calling ten of his servants, he gave them ten minas, and said to them, 'Engage in business until I come.' But his citizens hated him and sent a delegation after him, saying, 'We do not want this man to reign over us.'" (Luke 19:12-14)



Jesus may have been referring to a bit of recent Jewish history as a background to the story. Leaders of countries controlled by Rome had to appeal to the Roman emperor to be allowed to rule. Herod the Great, who was king of Israel at the time of Jesus' birth, had gone to Rome in 40 BC to petition the emperor Augustus to name him king. When Herod died, he left Samaria, Idumea, and Judea to his son, Archelaus, who in 4 BC went to Rome to confirm his position.



Because the people knew Archelaus to be a hard ruler, a delegation of 50 prominent Jews went to Rome to petition the emperor to not allow Archelaus to become king. The emperor gave him rule over the area, but did not appoint him king, giving him instead the title of ethnarch, with the understanding that if he ruled well he would be given the title of king. Within ten years, though, he was removed from his position by the emperor.

The situation of the nobleman in the parable going to a far country to receive a kingdom would have been understood as similar to someone petitioning the Roman emperor to be appointed king of a country.

Before the nobleman left on his journey, he called ten of his servants and gave each of them one mina, or pound as it is referred to in some translations. The value of a mina was about three months' wages for a laborer, so the amount given to each one represented about a hundred days' pay. While this wasn't a great deal of money, he specifically instructed them to engage in business with it until he returned.



In Matthew's Gospel, the parable tells of servants who were given talents—five to one servant, two to another, and one to the last. A talent was a monetary weight of between 60 and 90 pounds' worth of silver or gold. Depending on the metal, a talent would have the value of 60 minas, 6,000 days of wages for a laborer, or roughly payment for twenty years of work. (The value of the mina or the talent makes no difference in understanding the message of the parables.)



The nobleman in Luke's Gospel expects to return as king, though the delegation is hoping to stop that from happening. Among the population of the region he might reign over, the question of whether the nobleman will become king or the delegation will manage to prevent that, would make



the local political situation somewhat unstable. The servants doing business in his name or on his behalf would in essence be showing themselves to be aligned with him. The nobleman's enemies would certainly take note of who was loyal to the nobleman, and if they succeeded in having someone else named as king, then the nobleman's friends could be at risk. In unstable times, many people would lie low and bury their money and valuables rather than risk them, until the political situation was settled. However, the nobleman's servants were commanded to use the nobleman's minas to engage in business.

As it turns out, the delegation was unsuccessful and the nobleman returns home as king.

When he returned, having received the kingdom, he ordered these servants to whom he had given the money to be called to him, that he might know what they had gained by doing business. The first came before him, saying, "Lord, your mina has made ten minas more." And he said to him, "Well done, good servant! Because you have been faithful in a very little, you shall have authority over ten cities." And the second

came, saying, "Lord, your mina has made five minas." And he said to him, "And you are to be over five cities." (Luke 19:15-19)



Parables are short and give minimal details, so although there were ten servants who were given the minas, only three of the servants' performance is spoken of. The manner in which the first two servants respond shows that they understood that the minas they were given, as well as the increase gained through business, belonged to the king. The first says, "Lord, your mina has made ten more minas," and the second says that the lord's mina has made five minas.

These men have shown themselves to be faithful servants in conducting business according to the king's instructions. Besides being faithful, their actions could be seen as courageous. In spite of the unstable political situation and the people who hated the soon-to-be king, they did his business, and did it well.

These good servants were rewarded for their faithfulness, obedience, and courage. As a reward, the faithful servants receive authority and control of some of the cities in the newly appointed king's kingdom: the first over ten cities and the second over five.

The actions and the response of the third servant, however, were very different.

*Then another came, saying,
"Lord, here is your mina, which I
kept laid away in a handkerchief;
for I was afraid of you, because
you are a severe man. You take
what you did not deposit, and
reap what you did not sow."
(Luke 19:20-21)*

In Matthew's parable the unfaithful servant buried the money, which according to rabbinic law was considered the safest means of securing



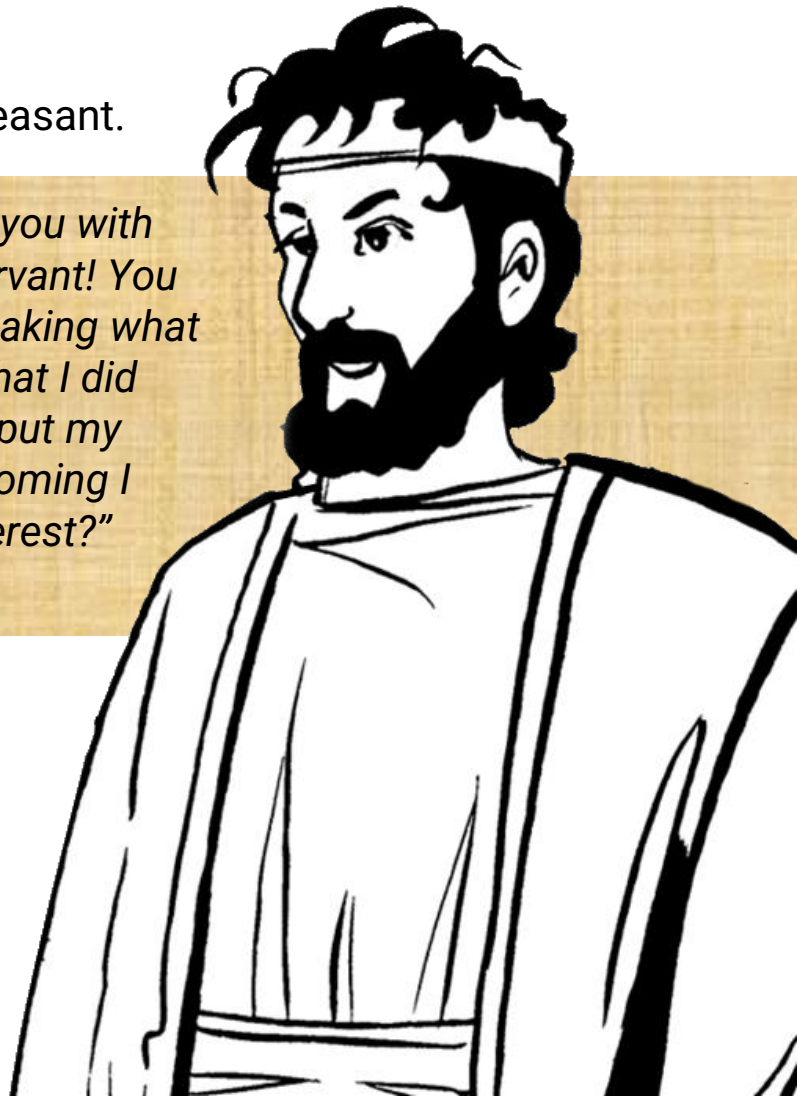
valuables against theft. When someone was entrusted to hold valuables for someone else, if they immediately buried them they were free from liability in the event they were stolen. In this case, the servant wrapped up the money in a piece of woven cloth about a square meter in size. Rabbinic law said that if someone guarded money in a cloth, he was responsible to make up any loss.

The third servant understood he was liable for the money, and he was afraid to invest it lest he lose it and be punished by the king. In doing so, he proved disobedient to the king's instructions to do business with the minas. His explanation for not following the king's original instructions was his fear of the king and his keen business sense. The king's investments made high profit, in ways which were not the result of his own efforts but rather from the work of others. Out of fear, instead of investing, he held the money in safekeeping and earned nothing.

The king's response wasn't pleasant.

He said to him, "I will condemn you with your own words, you wicked servant! You knew that I was a severe man, taking what I did not deposit and reaping what I did not sow? Why then did you not put my money in the bank, and at my coming I might have collected it with interest?"
(Luke 19:22-23)

The king turned the servant's words back on him. If this was how the servant saw the king, then he should have known the king would have expected some profit from the mina upon his return. Even if the Servant was afraid of losing



the money in risky investments, he could have at least earned a little profit by giving the funds to those who exchanged money from one currency to another for a fee or who loaned money for interest. It wouldn't have required work on the servant's part, and though it wouldn't have matched the first servant's profit of 1,000% or the second's profit of 500%, it would have at least been something.

The king passed quick judgment on the third servant.

And he said to those who stood by, "Take the mina from him, and give it to the one who has the ten minas."

And they said to him, "Lord, he has ten minas!"

"I tell you that to everyone who has, more will be given, but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away." (Luke 19:24-26)

The mina is taken away from the servant and given to the first one. This is met with the objection of others present who witness the scene. But the king retorts by stating that those who prove themselves faithful with what they are given will receive greater gifts, and those who are unfaithful will lose the gift they have.

The parable then turns to the enemies of the king.

"But as for these enemies of mine, who did not want me to reign over them, bring them here and slaughter them before me." (Luke 19:27)

In parabolic language, the warning of judgment is given. It isn't necessarily a realistic portrayal of the judgment which is to come, but it is stating that there is judgment.

So what does this parable teach us?

A number of things, but let's start with what the original listeners would have come away with. They would have likely understood that

everything that each person has belongs to God and each person is a steward of those things, including their abilities and strengths, and that God would hold them accountable for using them according to His commands in Scripture.



We can ask ourselves: How do I use the gifts that God has given me in this life, knowing the responsibility is mine to use them wisely? Do I recognize that all I have is God's, and do I use it in accordance with the instructions He has given?

Something else that those who were present when Jesus told this story may have understood was that He was pointing out that their expectation that Jesus as an earthly Jewish king or messiah would immediately free Israel from the Roman oppressors was inaccurate. And 25 to 30 years later, when Luke's Gospel was written, the readers would understand that the parable also had to do with the time period between the ascension of Jesus and His promised return. All of the Gospels were written decades after Jesus' death and resurrection, so those of us who read them have an additional insight into the meaning of the king being away and then returning.—That Jesus, while away now, will return; and that He has expectations when it comes to the gifts and talents God has given us.

The minas, representing God's gifts, are given as a test. Will God's servants be faithful with them? Will they be loyal to the king that they hope and believe will return, even though many others hope and believe He will never return? Will they do business in His name? Or will they be fearful? If they are both faithful and loyal, if they follow His commands, they will be rewarded, as those who were given rule over ten cities and five cities found out. And if we're unfaithful, while we

won't lose our salvation, the parable tells us that there are consequences for not heeding the commands of the king. There are degrees of reward for Christians and that each of us will stand before Christ to give account for our lives. How we live our lives on the foundation—Jesus—makes a difference.

Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw—each one's work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire. (1 Corinthians 3:12–15)

We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil. (2 Corinthians 5:10)

We are stewards of the life God has given us. He has lovingly and graciously given us salvation through His Son, who laid down His life for us all. Jesus, our King, will one day return to judge whether we have done what He has told us to do. May we each live our lives in a manner which reflects that of the faithful servants who obeyed their king's instructions. May we each hear the words, "Well done, good servant!"

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