

THE PARABLE OF THE TALENTS

THE PARABLE OF THE TALENTS

A NEW PERSPECTIVE ON AN
ANCIENT STORY

J.A. MCCORMICK



J.A. McCormick

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INTRODUCTION

This book examines the parable of Jesus commonly referred to as the parable of the talents. While the story is an ancient one, the perspective is new. Its message is intended for a global audience and has implications for each of us regardless of our background, religious persuasion, or lack thereof. Although the themes examined in this small book could occupy volumes, its contents have been deliberately condensed to its present size so as to most effectively and powerfully impact the reader.

A STORY

In the New Testament, there is a story that tells of a man who goes on a long trip and before leaving, gives a large sum of money to three of his servants to invest while he is gone. In Matthew's account, the amounts given are five talents, two talents, and one talent.¹ The first two servants invest theirs and are able to double their money, while the last servant hides his away for safe keeping. When the master returns, he rewards the first two servants graciously. After which, the last servant returns his one talent and explains that he was afraid and knew that the master would expect more than he gave. So, he had buried his talent away. The master is angry with this last servant and tells him

¹ Matthew 25:14-30

that he is lazy. He then takes away his one talent and gives it to the fellow with ten and casts the lazy servant into “outer darkness”.

When I was young, this story perplexed me for a few reasons. First, why was the master so hard on the third servant? I understand that he expected him to earn more money, but it wasn't like he lost the money or wasted it. And doesn't “outer darkness” sound a bit extreme?! I don't really know what that is, but it doesn't sound pleasant. It seemed to me that it would make more sense to punish the last servant and send him back to investment school for a few more lessons in money management. Of course, who knows? Perhaps the master had exactly that in mind after the servant had spent a little time in the cellar called “outer darkness”. We don't know. All we know is that the servant's failure to produce an increase appears to be a capital offense.

The other thing that puzzled me about this story was the nature of the master's business. I was raised in a working class

home with little extra money, so we were not investors on any grand scale. Growing up, I was raised to play it safe and was extolled to avoid gambling as a potential vice that could destroy my future as surely as drugs or alcohol. So for me, the behavior of the first two servants seemed fool hearty. Here they had been given a great sum of money, and the first thing they do is to go out and risk it on some fly by night business venture in which they could have lost their shirts! What if they had lost the masters money in the attempt? What would they have done then?! Wouldn't their fate have been worse than the fate of the last servant? Yet, the master had expected them to put his money at risk in a gamble of some sort. And what is more, he expected something even more unreasonable. He expected them to win! How is it that a person can be expected to win at a game of chance?

Here we begin to see that this story is speaking to us about more than money since this parable rates very poorly as business ad-

vice. It would be unrealistic in any economy to suggest that investors can expect to win all of the time. Consider also that there is no middle group. There is no record of a servant that invested and didn't gain an increase. In this story, every servant who opens himself to vulnerability and loss is rewarded with success and every servant who recoils in fear and refuses to trade loses in the biggest way possible.

So we see also that the parable is intended to touch the world in a universal way since these two traits are universal. Every individual born onto this planet is given as a free gift a certain set of truths, or perhaps better said, a different perspective on the One Truth. These perspectives come to us in many ways including our upbringing, our experiences, our education and our religious/spiritual training and beliefs. But, regardless of our different inclinations and persuasions, we are each faced with the same choice as the three men in the parable. What are we going to do with the gift we've

been given?

But before we examine that question too closely, let's look at what is required to make such a wager. Though the estimates differ as to how much a talent would be worth by today's standards, even by the more conservative estimates, these men were given no small bankroll. Imagine what it would have been like to sit there in your private room in the master's house with a bag full of gold beside your bed. What would have passed through your mind? Remember that as far as we know, it was all they had. At this point, they are servants, and it is likely that for them, this bag of money represented every hope of future joy and fulfillment. To open themselves to the risk of losing it would have been tantamount to losing their livelihood, their home, their friends and family, and considering the fate of the man who had not created an increase, possibly even their very souls! So to invest the money was an act of faith. For once the money was invested, only Providence could

bring it back to them and only Providence could bring an increase.

The other thing that we see is that all three servants were cognizant of the source of their good fortune. It was a gift from the master. When we view this in its broader context, we can see that to spite our varied persuasions, each of us believes our views to be right and cherishes them, honors them and defends them. We may give credit to Jesus, to the Universe or to Allah, but the thing that we have in common is that our views and beliefs are ours and that we value them. Even the person who claims no belief in a higher power reveals through his conviction the acknowledgment of an underlying premise: that such a knowledge of the absence of the divine is possible, in which case, the veracity of his position is something which he holds, dare I say, sacred.

The reason that this is important is that it points to an even greater paradox when considered in light of the situation into which

these servants were placed. For anyone who has ever held a gold coin in their hand, it would be difficult to convince them of a counterfeit because of gold's density and weight. So it is with each of us. Truth has a certain ring to it and even when some of our views are ill founded, it is usually because of the interwoven veins of truth that we hold to those views so tenaciously. We are convinced of the rightness of our position because at least to some extent, we are right. Of course from a more objective standpoint, our bankroll fades into insignificance when compared with the entirety of Truth itself. But our standpoint is not objective. It is anything but. For us, our little stash is all we have in the way of hard currency, and since we see it as no less than a gift from the divine, it can be difficult even to consider laying it upon the altar of Truth in exchange for an unseen promise of increase.

Nonetheless, it would appear from our story that that is exactly what the master has

in mind. He is in the business of growth, and it seems that he will be content with nothing less. The good news is that the deck is stacked in our favor. Remember that there are only two groups of people in this story. Those who fall back upon their own resources in an attempt try to evade the game altogether and those who risk. And since any sincere question of the heart is met with an increase, we cannot lose so long as we play the game.

The other good news is that the master seems unconcerned with the size of our purse. Since it is personal growth that he is after, it makes no difference to him whether we have one talent or two or ten as long as we show an increase. The ramifications of this fact are far-reaching. For millennia, the world has fought over who had the truth or who had the most truth. But we see here that such arguments dissolve when faced with the fact that we are in competition with no one but ourselves. And since trade is the means by which we increase, it

behooves us to speak more softly and listen more closely.

THE INVESTOR

Have you ever wondered what it is that causes certain people to rise to the top and shine when compared to the rest of humanity? I don't so much mean the ambitious who climb a ladder left for them by their predecessors. Those are a dime a dozen. I mean the individuals who transcend, the ones that find the answers and paths that were previously overlooked - the Einsteins, the Mother Teresas, the Gandhis and the like. They stand on a level all their own and compel our interest because they are examples of that to which we aspire. It is this group of people that can teach us the most about investment as they are a cross section of the world who has amassed the most in the way of personal growth.

Imagine now in your mind these people one by one and add any that may appear on your own list. They may be the founders of nations, inventors, authors, businessmen, clergy, farmers, scholars and the like. If you are a member of a sect, organization or profession, there may be some influential men or women that only people from your own kin would know. You may want to add a few of those to the list also. But do not add them *because* they are one of your own. To be in this group, they must stand aloft by a universal standard - that standard being one of transcendence. Make sure to include as many as you can remember. Now, picture them alongside one another shoulder to shoulder. Or better yet, imagine them at a dinner party, seated around decorated tables, having a meal together. What would it be like if someone threw such a party and invited the people who had contributed the most to mankind in the way of advancement no matter their field of endeavor?

What likely stands out most about this

gathering is how different they are one from another. One is almost tempted to laugh at the thought of it. There is Michael Jordan seated beside Mother Teresa and Steve Jobs. At another table sits Benjamin Franklin across from Gandhi, each in his native attire. Henry David Thoreau sits sporting the patched jacket that he wore during his days at Walden Pond and makes hand signals to the man seated across from him, Ludwig van Beethoven. But from the shadows at the far end of the hall, there is a movement of someone watching the proceedings from afar. It is Emily Dickinson who was lured from her room by the prospect of seeing King David, the writer of the Psalms. Like the trees of the forest, each of these has grown in a singular way, bending with the wind, their roots reaching downward through the earth past their own particular boulders in search of water, and their trunk shooting, twisting upward toward the light that shone past the shadows of their predecessors until they emerge, a strange, great,

peculiar and magnificent thing that towers above the rest, each one its own, with no other comparable. The exceptional ones are all this way – strange, in an awe-inspiring sort of way.

The fact that the most striking attribute that unites this group is diversity seems at first to be a paradox. But consider how much more they differ when compared with the mass of humanity, who's primary occupation is an unquestioning conformity to societal norms. In that light, the fact that these individuals are indeed themselves is truly remarkable. But what is it that causes them to stand out with such distinctness while others fade away into obscurity?

To begin to understand, consider the investors from our story. Have you ever wondered how they invested their money? The story doesn't tell us. But the likelihood is that they invested in whatever was of most interest to them. Perhaps the first servant had always fancied pearls and precious stones, while the second was a connoisseur

of ships. Since the master's only injunction was to make an increase, the servant's bankroll became far more than money. It represented freedom to pursue their individual interests. So that, the limits of their enterprise were only circumscribed by their imaginations and the size of their bankroll. When we view this gift of the master's in its broader context, we see that since there are no two of us alike, our investments are a process of endless diversification and result in nothing less than a human ecology.

But the human ecology is not yet perfect, especially when it comes to individual interest. One has only to consider the number of self-help programs that are designed to help a person find their life's purpose. And yet there are so many who's lives lack meaning. And for every person who seems to have found their niche in life, countless others are groping in the shadows or have given up the search altogether and joined the ranks of the billions who's life is no more than an endless pursuit of another paycheck. On

the other end of the spectrum are the disenchanted success stories of those who have laid down body and soul at the feet of the god of success only to find that they are more miserable than before.

So, what is the answer? Where is the investment that will bring a return of meaningfulness and significance?

Paradoxically, it is found in sacrifice. For it is through sacrifice that we lay down what we think we are and what we think we know in exchange for the slightest glimmer, even the minutest crack of light that shines forth from the forbidden place, forbidden for it breaks with conformity and sets at naught the solemn outward shrines of pretense. It is from this place that the unseen power listens for the sacred soul cries of the inward longings for truth which can no longer be squelched by performance and ritual. It is here that we begin, and it is here that the real me shoots forth from the forest floor, at last, to grow up among the greats.

For once a person becomes open to the idea that they will not find the truth that unlocks their life's meaning among the familiar but that instead it lies beyond their personal influence and must be shown to them by an unseen providence, it opens a whole new world of possibilities. The old shell of a man or woman cracks and a new light dawns upon them. Here they begin to realize that the truth which they seek is *one* thing and that they need not fear the truth, no matter its source, for it does not require them to leave their former love in favor of a new. It turns out that in renouncing the old they discover that they may keep all the truth they ever had. But this discovery is reserved for investors alone, for it is not until after we have acknowledged our insufficiency to grow in truth that we can begin to perceive with that vision which transcends boundaries and unites the otherwise disparate factions of humanity.

I find it interesting that the modern man or woman, when polled as to their religious

persuasion, increasingly replies “none”. On the surface, this appears to reflect an increasing awareness of the personal nature of our relationship to the divine. But, while such may be the case, it also manifests a lack of commitment and fidelity which comes from an inability to see the truth that unites us all. Only those who see with a broader vision can say with Gandhi “I am a Muslim *and* a Hindu *and* a Christian *and* a Jew.” So that, the investor’s path is one of adding and not subtracting. As he moves along, he is able to identify with more and more types of people until eventually there is no place upon the planet where he may roam where he is not at home. The whole of humanity is his family, and their cause is his own. And in most cases, he is a greater friend to their cause than they themselves are. For his perception pierces the shells of pretense and falsehood to arrive at the core truth contained within any system of belief.

Initially, because of this broader vision, the investor may find himself disavowed and

forsaken by friends, loved ones and even organizations which he still embraces in his own heart. All would be well if he could embrace the truth in word only. But the truth which he seeks invariably requires of him an investment of hard cash. Lip service will not do. And since the questions of his heart were born out of the unpredictable and apparently blind hand of circumstance, it is that same unseen and unpredictable hand of Providence that leads him on a path to the answers that eventually culminate in the discovery of his purpose and meaning in life. But to onlookers, the investor's path appears erratic and irresponsible. For his relationship with these is based upon a certain structure which he appears to threaten with his roaming and unpredictable approach. He may even embrace certain truths that set him forever at variance with certain individuals or organizations. But though he may find it necessary to suffer their rejection, he never turns upon them. For while he may be renounced for that portion of their creed

which he cannot embrace, it doesn't inhibit him from rejoicing with them in the rest.

The other woe which the investor may suffer is the prospect of his imminent ruin. At first and for a while, it may seem that he has spent his bankroll for naught since the fruit of truth takes time to mature. In the meantime, his state is worse than before, and he may have less than nothing to show for his investments. At these times, genuinely concerned friends may not be slow to tell him where it will all lead if he does not mend his ways. Since he cannot yet make out the meaning of it all himself, he is likely to find himself at a loss as to how to respond. In extreme cases, and especially for those who's burden of light is the greatest, it may seem that darkness reigns and threatens to destroy everything for which they have sacrificed so much. It is at these times that the investor may be tempted to renounce the path of truth for the ease which he once knew when the truth came to him packaged and prepared for easy consumption, albeit

incomplete and laced with falsehood. But by this point, it is too late. For by now he is familiar enough with truth to make it impossible to turn back without a willful act of rebellion against truth itself.

But whatever trials he must endure, uncertainty and misunderstanding can only prevail for a season. Eventually, the seemingly disconnected fragments of light begin to come together. And not until then do his varied investments make sense. It is only then that he can see his world clearly enough to know how he fits in it. And because he has been finding the answers to his *own* questions, he discovers that what he has to offer is truly needed and unique.

Can you imagine a world composed of fully unique individuals? The thought blows my mind! As a human race, we have been riding on the coattails of a few truly real people for our entire history. What would the world look like if every man and woman were their own? I think that we might be tempted to call it heaven. But the only way

that such a heaven could be maintained would be for each person to scrupulously mind his own business. Remember the great diversity of our dinner party guests! Is it possible for each of us to faithfully seek out the hand of the unseen in our personal lives and trust the same providential power to do its part with our neighbor? I propose that the degree that we can do so is the extent to which we may have heaven on earth.

THE FEARFUL

I am reticent to share the insights found in this short chapter because it deals with a subject which most of us, including myself, have done our best not to acknowledge. But, the parable is not complete without the third servant. His existence and the legitimate danger of becoming like him is real. And since there is still some degree of fear in most of us, I hope to encourage as many as possible to trust. I wish that I could paint you a picture of the third servant so that you could recognize him. But since he is a pretender, that would be impossible. Nonetheless, I will do my best to describe his underlying motives and their manifesting behaviors so that you may be equipped to recognize these traits in yourself.

The first thing that you must understand is that the path of the investor and that of the non-investor are mutually exclusive. Consider the fact that the master makes it clear that he would have been happy with the most measly increase. He even suggests to the non-investor that he could have put the money in the bank and gained a little interest. By this, we know that the master is able to reward even the weakest attempts at faith since by today's standards, a savings account would yield no more than a fraction of a percent annually. And since there is no category for those who risk but do not gain an increase, every yearning for truth, no matter how feeble, is answered with acceptance.

But the non-investor trusts his purse with no one but himself. He does not need the handout that Providence offers, but instead insists that if he only broods over his stash a little longer, that it will grow on its own. But in reality, he has only buried himself away. Fear and darkness have taken him

captive for he will not come into the light. Even if the master were to make him a gift of truth, he would run away screaming. And because he has chosen darkness over light, in the end, darkness is his reward.

By this, we know that for the non-investor, truth is not his primary motive. In fact, he purposefully avoids any place where he might come in contact with the answers to his soul questions. His talent is hidden away where there is not even a chance that it may be found, even by accident. This is why the fearful will not come to the altar of sacrifice. It strikes them with a terrible dread and foreboding for it threatens all that they have made of themselves. So that, they are not half-hearted in their ignorance. They are fully committed. They seem to know that were they to open the door even a crack to the idea of not knowing, it would fly open and invite with it every question that they had worked so hard to suppress. This is not to say that the fearful are not seekers. In fact, from outward observation, they may

show every sign of desiring the truth. But since they are unwilling to risk even a penny of their original bankroll, it is as though the truth is hidden from them. So that, search as they may, they only find proofs of their particular predilections.

But then again, non-investment comes with its own advantages. After all, pretense has the advantage of the appearance of authenticity and realness. And in the realm of pretense, a person may be whomever they want to be...accept themselves of course. To be that, they would have to let go of their plans. They would have to stop scheming and open themselves to the idea of not knowing. And that is something that they will not do.

But it would be a mistake to believe that the non-investor sees himself as such, for even open-mindedness and curiosity can be feigned, and the principle person whom the non-investor seeks to fool is himself. Indeed, it can be almost impossible to distinguish between the seekers of truth and the

people of the lie.² For each can be found in every walk of life imaginable. They are fathers and mothers, sisters and brothers. They share the same commuter rail, attend the same meetings and share the same pew. Thus the admonition to beware of judgment. But as a rule of thumb for oneself, a good question to ask is whether our desire is for the truth or to be *the kind of person* who wants to know the truth. It is a fine line.

In the end, it is up to us. All we are really deciding is who we are. Are we a thing created or are we the makers of ourselves? And the choice is one that will not be taken from us. It is at least one thing that for now we truly own.

But do not be deceived. The stakes are high. Consider that the world is now in crisis in every way: religious, political, social, environmental and economic. Many are realizing that the institutions upon which they have relied for security have grown old

² Peck, M. Scott. *People of the Lie: The Hope for Healing Human Evil*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983.

and proven themselves inadequate to answer the perplexities that we now face. Whether we realize it or not, we are now passing a threshold in this earth's existence that, once passed, we will never be able to return. And all who have built upon the foundations of pretense will discover that old ways will not do. Every proverb and platitude will fall short when faced with the questions that can only be answered by the *living*. The world needs you! Not your pastor or your professor or the golden idol of dead mentors which you have made of yourself!

Please, do not be afraid. Consider again that there are only two types of people in this story. You cannot fail if you will only open yourself to the idea that something more is needed to find the truth than that which you can obtain through your own devices and your limited paradigm. After all, we are all in this together. Won't it be nice to arrive home and share the stories of what we have learned along the way? And if there are sacrifices that must be made, precious ideas

that we must shed in favor of the truth, isn't that a price worth paying in order to actually be you? It's you that we all long for and you whom the master desires to bless with the joy of his presence.

EPILOGUE – CONFLICT AND THE LAST BATTLE

*“...and behold a great red dragon...
drew a third part of the stars of heaven
and did cast them to the earth.”³*

The differences between the two groups of people that I have outlined appears inconsequential from outward observation. And in fact currently, there is little to divide the children of light from the children of pretense. But things are about to change. For the differences that now seem trivial will soon draw a line in the sand that will divide the inhabitants of the earth into two opposing points of view that will become increasingly irreconcilable.

³ Revelation 12:3-4

Consider the implications of the faith pursued by those who have chosen a path of enlightenment. While they do not seek out trouble, there is no earthly sanctioned authority that carries more weight than their personal conscience. They hold a secret allegiance to an unpredictable unseen power and are apt to break with conformity at any turn in favor of what appears from outward observation to be a whim. Though they appreciate the praise and honor and remuneration that comes from their fellow men, for them it is far more about the product they produce, the fight they fight, the game they play or the people they help. In their particular field of endeavor, they are often passionate to the point of religiosity. But their passion is a private affair, and they require no comrades in arms. At the extreme, though they force their views on no one, they would not shirk to pay the ultimate price for the truth in their field, be it poetry or world peace.

On the other hand, the children of pre-

tense are unpredictable in another way for they are motivated by a desire, not for the thing itself, but for that which it can bring them. It is the appearance of perfection that they are after so that profit has become their primary motivation for action. For them, it is far more important to be a rock star than to make music. They are all about systems and see those who break with conformity as irresponsible. Saving the planet or the country or you is for them a personal duty, not that they so much are interested in any of those things themselves as much as being the kind of person who is interested. While they may have spiritual or religious inclinations and profess a belief in divine power, their actions reflect that in practice, it is up to them. “Pray as if it all depends on God and act as though it all depends on you” is their motto. These, though they manifest an outward fervor for their chosen form of idolatry, will jump ship when they discover that it no longer brings them the particular outcome they sought. So that, they are

both flattering and unfaithful.

In times of predictability, these two groups enjoy a communion one with another, and the two motives may even take up residence within the same breast. But as the threads of predictability unravel, it becomes impossible for them to share the same space. For, the children of light will cling more tenaciously and rely more faithfully upon their unseen power. And the children of pretense will cling more fervently to systems and to the failing power of their own wit, even after it no longer makes sense to rely upon these faculties. But for systems to work it requires buy-in and there is no other time in which it is more needed than in a time of crisis. While unconformity and altruism were once in vogue, in the times of tumultuous change that are coming, they will be seen by the faithless as the ultimate sign of infidelity. And then comes force. It is the last resort for those who have no other retreat than their programs and their creeds. And in no other time does it seem more justified

than when they believe that the dissenter threatens the very survival of the whole.

Then and not before will be manifest who truly are the children of light. For remember that they have shown that they are not beyond sacrifice. But do not be deceived, they are not without a defender and sovereign. And though he may be hidden for a season, he will not remain so forever. In the meantime, the battle will be fierce. The master intends to make investors of as many as he can. And the author of lies will not allow his kingdom to be uprooted without first showing his true colors.

Personally, I like the odds given in the story far better than anything I could have imagined as a young listener of Bible stories. It suggests that before all is finished, a full two-thirds will come to the altar of sacrifice. And in a world that is built upon pretense and which rewards its inhabitants for the degree to which they conform to the image of outward success, beauty, and accomplishment, that seems like nothing short of a

miracle. However, the thought that anyone, much less a third of the earth, could identify themselves so completely with the lies born of fear as to lose themselves altogether, disturbs me to the point of distraction. Therefore, I hope that this small book may be the means of persuading some to seriously consider the prospect of faith. Remember that, in the end, it is up to none but ourselves. May God bless us all.

AFTERWORD

If you have benefited from the perspective shared in this book, please consider sharing it with someone you know.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

J.A. McCormick is another someone like you who happens to be a writer. The truths shared in this book were obtained in the way described. He would love to hear from you and may be reached through his website.

<http://jamccormick.net>

