

“A Familiar Story, Revised”
Luke 19:11-27

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We are all creatures of habit. You are in the same pew that you were in last week; and if you are not, you are having a great deal of trouble worshiping today because you have not yet forgiven the person who took your spot!

You came to church the exact same route, and you probably parked in the exact same spot!

Jana Stoner returns this afternoon. I signed her marriage license, but actually getting people not to call her Jana Wright is going to take a greater power than I have!

Preachers are creatures of habits as well. We have tendency to focus on parts of Scripture to the exclusion of others.

We have some preachers who seem to believe that the whole message is hidden somewhere in Daniel and Revelation.

Some preachers think that the whole Gospel is summed up in God’s blessings for us while others think that the entire Gospel is God’s curse on those they don’t like.

This sermon is the 1,311th sermon that I have preached. To my knowledge, I have never used today’s text as a primary Scripture for a sermon.

I tend to believe that I am not alone on that. It is not one on which many of us have spent much energy.

I was actually re-studying the story of Zacchaeus and the sycamore tree for this stewardship season, when I noticed what happened after Jesus’ encounter with this chief tax collector.

Jesus told the crowd a story.

We need to learn from this story today. It is not an easy one, but Jesus’ stories never are.

The story is a parable, which means that it is a story told for a specific purpose. One of the reasons that this story has been so overlooked is that Jesus told another story very similar to it, with basically the same message.

We call the other story, “*The Parable of the Talents.*” Jesus introduces it as a description of the kingdom of heaven.

A man was leaving on a journey, and he left his servants in charge of his belongings. He gave each of them a share of his wealth, to one he gave five talents, to one he gave two, and to another he gave one talent.

A talent is a unit of monetary value that we will consider in just a moment.

The master returned one day and called his servants to show him how they had done with his investment.

As the story goes, the one who was given five talents earned five more. The one who had received two talents, doubled them, and had a total of four talents to give to the master.

In response to the productivity of these two servants, the master replied with the often-quoted phrase, “Well done, good and faithful servant” (Matthew 25:21).

The third servant, the one to whom the master had only given one talent, hid the talent in the ground until the master returned.

Fearing his master, the servant presented the original talent, without any earnings.

The single talent is taken away from this servant, and he is banished from the master’s estate.

In summary, Jesus says, “For everyone who has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him” (Matthew 25:28-29).

That parable is well-known for its lesson in admonishing us to use what we have for God’s glory.

But then we have this other story. It is very similar, but with a few extremely pointed differences.

These differences between the two stories are where I want to turn our focus this morning.

Jesus tells the parable of the ten minas as soon as he gets Zacchaeus down out of the tree.

There was already a crowd gathered because Jesus was passing through Jericho. When He walked to the side of the road, through the parade lines, and started calling for the tax collector to come down from the tree so they could have a meal together, the crowd intensified.

Jesus saw that this was a very teachable moment. He told them this parable.

Luke gives us some insight into what Jesus was thinking when he tells us that Jesus told the parable because He was getting close to Jerusalem and the people did not yet understand that when He left, He was not returning immediately.

This little bit of knowledge is very valuable because we learn that Jesus tells the story about Himself.

He is the man of noble birth who leaves and returns later. The parable is also a metaphor.

We still do not tell this story very often. If I had started the sermon by asking you what a mina was, most of you would not have known that it was a unit of monetary measure.

This story has not become part of our normal Bible lesson. After we learn more about it this morning, we may all prefer only to have the parable of the talents.

We like the parable of the talents better, because the parable of the minas contains some details that the story of the talents does not mention.

1. Talent or Mina?

In each of the stories, the wealthy man leaves part of his wealth with some of his servants.

The difference is that in the story of the talents, he leaves one of the servants with 5 talents, one of them receives 2, and the last one receives 1 talent.

You can't feel too sorry for the poor soul who only got 1 talent to invest because 1 talent was worth about 15 years of wages.

If you figure that you may work at your career about 45 years during a lifetime, you would be paid a total of about 3 talents.

A talent was a great deal of money.

Consider the fact that the first servant received 5 talents, that is the equivalent of almost 1 ½ a lifetime of wages!

When he doubled the 5 talents, he returned to his master 150 years worth of wages.

On the other side of the coin, we have the parable of the minas.

Ten servants are called forward, and each one is given one mina.

A mina is only worth about 1/60 of a talent. In other words, it would take 60 minas to equal a talent in the New Testament monetary structure.

To translate that into earning power, a mina is worth about 3 months pay. That is still nothing at which we should scoff, but it is certainly a far cry from a third of a lifetime of wages.

So you say, *Why does it matter how much the master gives each person? It's only a parable.*

It matters because the parable of the minas reminds us that we all have a responsibility to return to the Master, not just the ones with a large bag of talents.

One of the areas of my life where my bag of talents is very small is in the musical category.

I cannot sing; I cannot dance. I was given a mina's worth of ability in each of these.

When we were in college at Baylor, one of the big events on campus between fraternities and sororities was a competition called All-University Sing.

Most of the organizations on campus produced a 10-minute or so musical dance number for the judges and student body.

It was a big deal. There were costumes, directors, choreographers, and hours of practice. These practices would stretch far into the night, for weeks.

Since I was a member of a local service club on campus, I participated in All-University Sing.

I was measured for the outfit. I was given the rehearsal schedule.

I was given the music to memorize, and then I was promptly placed on the very back row, almost behind the curtain.

Out of 50 or so people in our production, I was in the least conspicuous spot.

In the estimation of the directors, I was only given about a mina of ability for this show.

But no matter how far back they placed me, if I messed up, it affected the whole performance.

Each group wanted to do well because there was a huge brag factor involved on campus, plus the winning acts got to perform at next year's homecoming.

I know where you think this story is going. You think I moved when everyone else was still, raised my hands when everyone else had their hands at their side, and fell on my face during one of the moves.

I am pleased to report that your mina-sized expectations of me are all wrong. I didn't mess up.

The reason is that I worked non-stop in preparing for the performance. I knew that I couldn't rely on God-given ability to get me by, so I had to take what little gift God had given me in this area and develop it to its best.

Now, I don't want to mislead you, I didn't win "Dancing with the Stars;" but I didn't cost us the competition either!

Even though I was one of the least gifted by the Master in the whole competition, I did not have an excuse not to work my hardest.

That lesson is part of the parable of the minas.

We cannot rely just on the very talented to get God's work done. If we only had the parable of the talents to go on, we might be able to leave this lesson in the hands of those who have vaults of money, or countless hours of time, or unlimited talents.

After all, in the parable of the talents, the smallest gift was worth 15 years of salary.

But then Jesus had to tell us this story about the minas. The master gives a gift of 1/60th a talent, as though to remind us that whether we are working with a bag of talents or a single mina, we are expected to produce for the master.

When it comes to our Ministry Action Budget, those who only have a mina with which to work and those who have bags of talents have the same expectation from the master.

Not equal amounts, but equal sacrifice.

The same applies to our worship. Some of us certainly have more to offer our Master in song than others, but each of us is expected to give Him what He has given us.

The ending of the story emphasizes this truth all over again.

To the servant who did nothing with his gift, "His master replied, 'I will judge you by your own words...'" (Luke 19:22).

The accountability we have toward God is based on what we have done with what He has given us.

It is not compared to the work of anyone else or to the opinion of anyone else. Our investment in the kingdom is based on what we have done with what He has given.

The story of the minas rules out the excuse that they have more money than I, more ability than I, more time than I, more of anything than I.

The story of the minas reminds us that the Master expects back what He has given, whatever that may be.

2. Dirt or napkin?

The parable of the talents is relatively non-caustic in that the one of whom the master disapproves only buries the talent in the ground.

In the parable that we study today, the servant placed the mina away in a piece of cloth. What's the difference, you may ask? The emphasis lies in the symbolism.

It is no ordinary piece of cloth to which Jesus refers. It has two primary purposes.

First, this napkin, as it is often translated, is the cloth that workers would use to wipe sweat from their foreheads during a hot day of labor.

Since this servant did not work; he did not sweat!

I once had someone tell me that he hid an important document in his Bible. Of course, my first thought was that it should be safe there because it would never fall out from overuse!

Similarly, the servant indicted himself by hiding the coin in his work rag.

But it is the second use of the word for cloth that is the most disturbing. This napkin is also used to wrap the head of a corpse in burial.

It was used to wrap the head of our Lord.

When Simon Peter arrived at Jesus' tomb on resurrection day, "He saw the strips of linen lying there, as well as the burial cloth that had been around Jesus' head. The cloth was folded up by itself, separate from the linen" (John 20:6-7).

That part of the resurrection caught Peter's eye immediately. The cloth that had held the precious head of His Lord was oddly placed differently than the other linen wrappings.

Since we know that Jesus is telling this story because He was heading to Jerusalem for His death, He poignantly describes the servant as hiding the mina in the burial cloth, as though by doing so, he was personally burying Jesus.

We do the same. That is why we avoid this parable.

When we refuse to give what He has given us, or use what He has given us, we hurt more than ourselves.

We certainly harm more than those who are supposed to benefit from our gifts.

We are burying Jesus again. We are symbolically placing His head back in the tomb, because His resurrection is being silenced.

I ought to finish the story about the napkin around Jesus' head. They buried Him in it, but He came back to life.

One day He is going to return. The Master wants to see the napkin used, not to bury anything else, but to wipe the sweat of our brow in our work for the kingdom.