

The Forgotten Servant

I'm sure you're familiar with the parable of the talents. You know, the one where the master entrusts three of his servants with some money and then leaves town for a while.

Yeah, I know that one. When the master comes home, he finds that two of the servants have doubled his money. But the third buried it and only has the original amount to give back.

Right. And the two faithful servants are invited to share in their master's joy while the third is kicked out. But did you know that in the ancient texts there is a fourth servant?

Really? What's his story?

Well, it seems the fourth servant was most anxious to honor his master and do something good with the money he had been given. But while he was thinking about what to do, he began noticing that some of the other servants had things that he didn't...nicer cloaks, larger rooms, better food. He couldn't understand why they had these things and he didn't, and it made him feel a little inadequate and a little jealous. After all, didn't he work just as hard...perhaps even harder...than they did? Didn't his family deserve to have the best?

Then one day the servant saw a beautiful cloak in a merchant's shop. "If I had such a cloak" he thought to himself, "the other servants would respect me more and I would be much happier." Unfortunately, the servant did not have enough money of his own to buy the cloak.

But the merchant knew the servant's master to be very wealthy, and he saw this as an opportunity to gain favor with the master. So he offered to let the servant have the cloak in return for part of the money and the promise to pay the rest later.

The servant's heart quickened. This would only take a small part of the master's money and he could still do something good for his master with the rest. And surely he could replace the money he had used by the time his master returned.

So off the servant went in his fine new cloak. He hadn't gone far when he met a man selling beautiful Persian rugs. "Such a rug would be much more comfortable to sleep on than the straw mats we have now" the servant thought to himself. "We would be the envy of all the other servants. Besides, if I were well rested, I'm sure I could do so much more to please my master."

But again the servant did not have enough money of his own to buy what he wanted. Thinking the servant to be a man of means because of the fine cloak he was wearing, the rug merchant offered to sell the rug to him for a small payment, with the rest to be paid later.

This delighted the servant, who soon found that he could acquire most anything he desired this way. And so he did until he had many fine things for himself and his family.

But as he acquired more, the servant realized that his heart had become burdened with all of the things he had bought. For now the servant worried about how to protect all of his fine new possessions from thieves and moths and rust. He resented the time he had to spend taking care of them, finding places to keep them, moving them around to those few things he still used.

The servant began to realize that the happiness and contentment he had when he bought something new was temporary and unfulfilling. He seldom thought about his master anymore. He knew that one day his master would return and he would have to give an accounting, but that time seemed too distant. Besides, he had to deal with the accountings the merchants presented to him.

And that had become the servant's greatest burden. The merchants, of course, wanted to continue to be paid for what they had sold the servant. The servant truly wanted to pay them, but the small amounts the merchants kept asking for added up to large amounts that the servant found difficult to pay. He worried about how he would pay them, and it caused great strife and tension in his household.

Ask the Budget Guy, cont'd

Okay, Budget Guy, stop right there. This isn't from any "ancient text"...you're making this all up!

Well, yes. I must admit that I have no way of reading the ancient texts. Or any other text not written in English, for that matter!

So this is just your feeble attempt at being cute!

Feeble, perhaps, but no intention of being "cute." You see, I believe Jesus' parables are all incomplete. He laid the groundwork for us in each parable, and then left the final "chapter" for us to write based on how we apply that parable to our own lives.

Hmmm. So in the parable of the talents, you see God as the master and the fourth servant as you or me?

Right. Isn't the parable really a lesson for us in how God wants us to manage all that He has entrusted to us?

We like to think that what we have is due to our own talents and hard work, but we all know that it really comes from God. That's fundamental to our very belief in God. He's the one who gave us those talents, gave us the desire to work hard.

And Scriptures like the parable of the talents and Luke 16:11 ("If, therefore, you have not been faithful in the use of worldly wealth, who will entrust the true riches to you?") remind us that we are merely stewards of what we have. How we handle that stewardship is a critical measure of our faith.

So tell me, Budget Guy, how does your new chapter to the parable of the talents end?

I don't really know. I mean, I could write any ending I want to for the fourth servant, but what's really important is how it ends for you and me. And those endings are still being written.

I will say this, though. I believe that it's okay to want nice things. God means for us to find joy in life, and a certain amount of joy can be found in material things. However, it's *not* okay when the "wanting" and the "having" become our goals

in life, become the standard by which we measure ourselves and our happiness.

Unfortunately, it's too easy to believe that our inalienable rights include life, liberty and the *purchase* of happiness. It's really not surprising - our economy depends on it. Once upon a time, you built a successful business by creating a better mouse trap - finding a need and filling it. Now, there doesn't need to be any real need for your product; you just have to come up with a marketing campaign that makes us *think* there is. And it sure seems like we're easy to convince!

So the ending I'm trying to write for myself is based on three core beliefs:

1. I will be the best steward of the time, talents and material wealth God has given me by investing in God, my family, and my friends.
2. I will find the greatest happiness and contentment by following belief #1.
3. When in doubt, see beliefs #1 and #2.

These beliefs have me sorting through the emotional and physical clutter I've accumulated over the years, discarding what doesn't add value. It takes time, it takes energy, and it can hurt. Even if you don't consciously realize it, when you get rid of something you're taking a loss and you're admitting you made a mistake - two things none of us likes to do.

It's a struggle, but every once in a while I seem to get it right and the feeling is almost overwhelming.

Now if you will excuse me, I have some old model railroad magazines I think I'm finally ready to get rid of. You wouldn't by any chance be interested in them, would you?

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