

**Title:** Risky Behavior

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**Scripture:** [Genesis 1:26-28a](#)

**Text:** [Matthew 25:14-30](#)

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Today, we are going to talk about risky behavior, a subject that we hear a lot about these days. We are told that gathering in a large group, indoors, without masks and social distancing is risky behavior. Travel is considered risky behavior. Hugging or shaking hands is now risky. I might point out, that spending late hours in a bar is

risky which is something that has always been the case.

What makes these warnings about risky behavior difficult is the inconsistent messages about what is safe and what is risky. I, like you, have found myself asking, now is this risky or not? And I like you, observe others who are willing to accept a risk that is high but are fearful of something that is low risk. Risk assessment is confusing.

It always has been the case and we see this as Jesus tells us another parable, one of six, Matthew says, he tells in the last week of his life. Three are told in the presence of the chief rulers, scribes, and Pharisees and three to just followers. Often the last three are interpreted as stories about the end, about what happens when we die. But Jesus tells them before he was nailed to a cross and before anyone knew anything about the resurrection, weeks before they saw him ascend into heaven. They are stories about living, not just dying. You can see this in the way today's story is connected with last week's story.

Do you remember it? I know you've slept since then. It was about ten bridesmaids, five wise and five foolish. First-century Jewish bridesmaids had one job to do. It wasn't to look pretty and walk down the aisle in support of the bride. It was to light the way of the bride and groom at night to the wedding venue. For some reason, "When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them." (Matthew 25:2b) They had one job to do and they blew it. The end result was they didn't get to enter into the joy of the wedding banquet. No light, no joy. That was the point, a lesson about the

kingdom of heaven. Shine the light of Christ into the world and you will enter into the joy of the kingdom. But no light, no joy.

Today's story today can be summarized similarly. Instead of light, this story is about risk. No risk, no joy. Like last week's story about first-century wedding practices, we need to understand the background before we can get to no risk, no joy. Let me explain.

If you were listening back in September, you remember Jesus likes to tell stories about talents. The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant has 10,000 talents of debt forgiven. I shared that the talent has nothing to do with gifts and abilities but rather, it comes from the Greek word *talanta*. A *talanta*, a talent was the largest monetary denomination throughout the ancient world. In the first century, one Roman talent represented 71.3 pounds of silver or gold but the size. This means that ten thousand talents is an enormous sum of money, a million zillion dollars to first-century listeners.<sup>1</sup>

A better way of understanding talent is what it represented. One talent was the equivalent of 6,000 denarii. A denarii was one day's wage for a laborer with a family of four. Six thousand workdays is 15 years of income, so one talent equaled 15 years of work. I'd like someone to give me a talent, two would be better. Five would be incredible, right?

Now, look at the story. Jesus says to his followers, the kingdom is like "...a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away." (Matthew 25:14-15). Now you see why we need background info. One he trusted with 15 years of income; another 30 years, the last 75 years, trusted "to each according to his ability." That's important. This guy wasn't just loaded; he was perceptive. He knew who had gifts and abilities, who had the talent to care for his talents.

Jesus says he was gone a long time. How long is a long time? Our pandemic seems like a long time but it's just been seven months. It may be another seven months or more before normal shows back up sometime next year. In the Bible, a long time isn't next week, next month, even next year; it's years.

Years later the master finally comes home and he wants to know how the slaves have taken care of his talents. Jesus tells says that the one who was given five talents doubled the amount. How do you double your money without taking some risk? Whatever risk he took, it paid off, big time and the Master was very pleased. "Well done, good and trustworthy slave...enter

into the joy of your master.” (Matthew 25:21) I judged your ability correctly. Risk leads to joy.

The master received more good news. When he called forward the slave who he gave two talents, he too doubled the amount given to him. Two times two is four and a delighted master said again “Well done, good and trustworthy slave...enter into the joy of your master.” (Matthew 25:23) I judged your ability correctly. Risk leads to joy.

The story now turns with the one who had just received one talent. He “...came forward, saying “Master, I knew that you were a harsh man...so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.” (Matthew 25:24a,25) It might be important to point out that this was a common practice in the first century. There wasn't a bank on every corner like now. You could find moneylenders, sometimes called bankers, in the town square, but there were no banks like we know today. Hiding money in a field was like putting money under a mattress and was commonplace. Remember, Jesus says the "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and...in his joy he ... buys that field.” (Matthew 13:14)

But there isn't incredible joy with this treasure because, over the many years, it did nothing. It didn't grow. The master exclaims: You buried my talent? Afraid to risk? I trusted you but you didn't trust me. At the very least “...you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return, I would have received what was my own with interest. (Matthew 25:26a, 27) So he threw him out into the darkness, where there was weeping and gnashing of teeth. Weeping and gnashing of teeth sounds like no joy. And burying a talent was no risk. That's where we started. Like no light, no joy. Now it's no risk, no joy.

I need to explain something to you. This isn't a story about money even though I've spent time explaining how valuable a talent was. The amount of money Jesus was talking about was far more incredible than the way I described. The eight talents passed out to the three slaves was equivalent to the entire tax revenue paid to King Herod by the entire citizenship of all the people living in Galilee and Judah. For one person, at that day and age to have that amount of wealth, was simply impossible, laughable. Eight talents is less than 10,000 talents but it is almost the same. Not a zillion million but at least a zillion. Why did Jesus use these outlandish numbers?

It was Jesus' symbolic way of talking about life in general, about the incredible wealth of blessings, resources, and abilities that God gives each of us. It is a story about living life fruitfully and experiencing the joy that

comes from it. <sup>2</sup> When God completed creation, God blessed us and said, "Be fruitful and multiply." That's a challenge to experience the joy of God's kingdom. But you can't be fruitful and multiply by doing nothing, burying your gifts, abilities, and resources.

The disciples should not have been surprised by this story. Jesus hated dormancy, hated looking good but not bearing fruit. A few days before these last stories, he curses a fig tree that looks healthy, leafy, and green but was bearing no fruit, "all show and no go." The worst thing that can be done when gifts are offered and trust is given is to do nothing. What is perceived as playing it safe is the biggest risk of all because no risk means no joy.

Jesus doesn't give any reason for the slave's risk avoidance save for one thing. He doesn't love his master. He is interested only in himself, and consequently, security, not risk, is his goal. He doesn't love his master and therefore, isn't willing to risk for him even though his master placed enormous trust in him and believed in his ability. "To each according to his ability" is a challenge by Jesus to make full use of the gifts that God has entrusted to us. This parable insists that the gifts which are given are precious and are to be exploited to the full.<sup>3</sup> And when you risk by using your gifts, you enter into the joy of the master.

Think about what Jesus teaches, what he wants his disciples to do. He wants us to care for our neighbors. He wants us to give generously for the sake of the kingdom. He wants us to love God and our neighbor as ourselves. He wants us to live by hope. The major themes of the Christian faith - caring, giving, loving, hoping - cannot be understood or lived without risk."<sup>4</sup> Each requires putting yourself out there.

Jesus demands something from his disciples. Jesus demands "fruitfulness." We are to bear fruit. We are to bear witness. Jesus insists that we "invest" not "inter." We are to "bear," not "bury." To bury your gifts, your talents and your strengths is to be one of the living dead, to be buried alive. The work of discipleship is to bear witness to the love and forgiveness that Jesus left with us. Besides, God loves to grant forgiveness and grace. What's the worst that could happen if we risk and fail? Grace, amazing grace.

In light of this story, how risky is your behavior? <sup>5</sup> I hope your answer is very because that is the way for you to hear "Well done, good and trustworthy servant...enter into the joy of your master." (Matthew 25:21)

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<sup>1</sup> Brisson, E. C. (2002). Matthew 25:14-30. *Interpretation*, 56(3), 307-310.

<sup>2</sup>CHILTON, BD. Talents and the Art of the Parable. *Living Pulpit*. 6, 3, 18-19, July 1, 1997. ISSN: 1059-2733.

<sup>3</sup> Douglas R. A. Hare, *Interpretation: Matthew*, Louisville: John Knox Press, 1993, p. 287-288.

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<sup>4</sup> Fred Craddock

<sup>5</sup> Productive or Prudent, Leonard Sweet, November 2011.