

Commentary on Matthew 25:14-30 by Marie Balmary

The Mathematics of the Kingdom,
in Ce lieu en nous que nous ne connaissons pas - À la recherche du Royaume, p. 39-78

(Detailed summary)

v. 14

It is like a man going on a journey (*apodemeō*): he calls his own (*idios*) servants and entrusts them with his possessions (*hyparchonta*).

It is said of the man who is about to depart that he calls not his (*autos*) servants, but his own (*idios*) servants; it is as if these servants were part of his identity. Similarly, to describe the goods he is handing over, the Greek text uses the word *hyparchonta*, formed from *hyper* (above, more than) and *archōn* (leader), i.e. that-over-which-he-has-command, often translated as “possessions.” It is therefore a part of himself, of his world, that he is preparing to hand over before leaving his country (*apodemeō*).

v. 15

To one he gives (*paradidomi*) five talents, to another two, to another one: to each according to his own strength [*kata ten idian dynamin*].
And he goes away.

Before disappearing, the man *transfers* (*paradidomi*) his possessions; note that he does not entrust them to someone else for safekeeping, but rather “gives” them away. It is therefore a *transfer without taking back*, and it is therefore a mistake to speak of “entrusting” money with the idea of having to return it later; the money given no longer belongs to the master. And he gives to each according to his “own strength.” What strength is this? This strength can only be the capacity to receive. Not everyone has this capacity. For example, there are heirs to great fortunes or people who have been blessed with exceptional intelligence or great beauty, but who have not had the capacity to transform this stroke of luck into true happiness, who have been unable to bear this life and enjoy their wealth and gifts, and who have ultimately been able to appropriate only their destruction. In short, man has given “to each according to his *own strength*,” that is, according to his ability to make what he has been given *his own*, to integrate it, to make it his own, to digest the gift. The metaphor of food shows that it is not enough for me to receive food to be nourished; I must also work on it: chew it, digest it, and thus appropriate what is good for me, make it mine, my body, my energy.

v. 16-18

Immediately, the one who received five talents went to work with them and earned five more.
Likewise, the one with two earned two more.
But the one who received only one went off, dug a hole in the ground, and hid his master's money.

Thus, the first two servants begin to “work with” (*ērgasato en autois*), literally working within themselves, i.e., working with their talents, transforming them, putting them to work. For both the one who received five talents and the one who received two, this work yields double. This means that the number five equals the number two, because regardless of the amount received, the important thing is to take ownership of what is given, to develop it by working until the fruit of the labor is equal to the gift.

Note that the adverb “immediately” in the Greek text can apply both to the master in the previous sentence and to the servants, as the sentence has no punctuation. Applied to the master, the sentence means: *he leaves immediately*, i.e., he does not stay a minute longer to watch what the servants are going to do; leaving immediately and going far away without mentioning a return, he hastens to give them a great deal of freedom and time to integrate and make fruitful what they have received.

The fact that the first servant earns five more talents and the second earns two more talents seems to accentuate the inequality, since in the end one ends up with ten talents and the other with four. But the story emphasizes another logic: the two have become equal because they have demonstrated the *same ability to double the gift*. They are therefore of equal strength and value; this is true *equality*. And such equality serves as the basis for *brotherhood*.

What about the third servant? He hides his master's money. Why? He believes that this money is still “his master's money,” not his own, because he does not believe in the gift, he does not believe in himself as the recipient of the gift. In short, he does not have the capacity to receive what his master gives him and prepares to return it to him. And in the culture in which this story takes place, the custodian of property is not liable for theft if he has buried the thing he was supposed to keep in the ground.

The question arises: why is it that the one who received only one talent is precisely incapable of earning others? A first answer may be suggested by the word “likewise” to describe the actions of the first two servants, as if their actions were concerted, as if they belonged to the same community, while the third servant is alone on his side. Thus, in order to defeat the all-powerful figure of the Master, or if you will, the persecuting superego or the “Big Eye watching us,” we need a relationship with others, we need to live together or be part of a community, which explains the failure of the third servant, lost in his isolation. A second answer is suggested by the symbolism of numbers: if we associate the number five with the fingers of the hand and the

number two with the hands, the next step is the unity of the human being who manages these hands, each with five fingers; there would therefore be a progression in the quality of the talents distributed, the last and only talent being the highest and most difficult to digest. The symbolism of numbers suggests a third explanation based on the story of creation in seven days in Genesis. Indeed, the master first distributes five talents, then two talents, which may evoke the first five days of creation when the Creator made the world and the animals, then on the sixth day he made human beings, and on the seventh day he rested and disappeared. The eighth talent, given to the third servant, evokes the eighth day after the week of creation, when humans join the divine. For Christians, this eighth day, Sunday, celebrates the resurrection of Christ. In Genesis, this eighth day is never reached, as Adam and his wife cannot find the passage, having transgressed the prohibition whose observance gave access to the divine condition, and they will die. Similarly, the third servant is the figure of this failure.

v. 19

After a long time, the master of those servants came and took up-together *logos* with them [*kai sunairei logon met' auton*].

After a long time, the master *comes*. The Greek text does not speak of "returning," as if it were a round trip planned from the beginning, but rather of a coming as a new event.

Why does he come? According to the Greek text: *kai synairei logon met' auton*, literally: and he takes up together account/word with them. It is a mistake to translate this as "he settles accounts with them," as if the money still belonged to the master and he wanted to know the state of his assets. The Greek word *logos*, usually translated as "word," is used here with the idea that the master wants them to give an account of the situation together, to make a report together.

v. 20

The one who received five talents approaches. He presents five more talents, saying, "Master, you gave me five talents. Look! I have earned five more talents."

The text tells us: "He presents five *other* talents." This servant does not come to return what he has received, because he has not even brought what he has received. These are the five *other* talents that he has brought, and he has brought them not to give them to the master, but to show them to him ("See!"). These are his own gains, his own work. We are not dealing with a story of restitution, but a *story of recognition*.

v. 21

His master said to him, "Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's joy."

The master's reaction ("well done") recalls that of the creator before his work in Genesis.

"Enter into the joy of your master." In the Bible, joy is associated with a unique, unforgettable event: it is the joy Job feels at the birth of a child, it is the jubilation at Solomon's coronation, it is the joy accompanied by glory that YHWH gives to those who have chosen to be at the threshold of his house, it is the joy of the Magi finding the star that leads them to the child-king, it is the joy of the shepherd who finds his sheep, it is the joy of the women learning of the resurrection, it is the joy that Jesus wants to convey to those who accompany him, "perfect joy," "which no one will take away from you." By entering into this joy, the servant leaves his status as a servant forever.

"Servant... trustworthy." He has been *trustworthy* in giving and in reading the gift. He has understood it well as such. The master did not give him so much wealth in vain; it has borne fruit in his hands. Above all, the use he has made of it has produced a transformation far greater than the increase in wealth. That is why the master considers the talents given to be of little importance, for they relate to the verb "to have," which is incomparable to what the good and reliable servant has made possible: that the master can now invite him, the servant-man, to join him in joy.

v. 22-23

Then the one who had received two talents came forward. He presented two more talents, saying, "Master, you entrusted me with these talents. Here are two more that I have earned." His master said to him, "Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's joy."

The second servant gives an identical account to the first: he too returns nothing, presenting the master with the talents he has earned without bringing back the talents received. The only difference is the number of talents presented: two instead of five. But what matters is quality, because this second servant receives the same words from his master, word for word, as the one with five talents. The same approval, the same recognition of reliability, the same promise of being set over much, and ultimately the same access to his master's joy. Thus, the two servants, even though they received a different number of talents, are fundamentally equal: they both welcomed the gift as a gift, they both doubled what they received, and they both left their status as servants.

v. 24-25

Approaching as well, the one who had received one talent said, "Master, I know you, that you are a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, gathering where you did not scatter. I was afraid, so I went and hid your talent in the ground. See, you have what is yours."»

"See: you have what is yours." The third servant believed and continued to believe that the talent still belonged to the master, and he returned it to him.

"I know you, that you are a hard man." This claim to knowledge is false, for it was the same master who distributed and sowed the talents without demanding anything in return: how can one say of him that he reaps where he has not sown and gathers what he has not scattered? But once this false knowledge is anchored in the mind, everything else follows logically: "I was afraid," "I went and hid." We find a similar reality in the story of Genesis, where the man and woman mistakenly believed that God had not given them the knowledge of good and evil, a misinterpretation of the prohibition, and because of this false knowledge, Adam says: "I was afraid..." and hid himself. This is a reflection of life: when we think we know someone in advance, without them, we see in them only what we imagine, and what we imagine of the other person, objectified, is always what frightens us, what threatens us.

v. 26-27

"Unhappy servant, and hesitant! You knew that I reap where I have not sown, that I gather where I have not scattered. You should therefore have placed my talent with the bankers. And when I came, I would have recovered what is mine, with interest."

The master accepts being seen as the other person sees him, entering into the very logic of his interlocutor. In psychoanalytic terms, he "accepts the transference." He repeats what the servant had said ("I know you, you are a hard man"), but with a slight variation: "You knew that I harvest..." He mentions only the activities, as if it were only an idea or an object.

"Unhappy servant, and hesitant!" This servant is hesitant because he does not dare to take the first step toward sovereignty by accepting the incredible gift and entrusting it to others, to those whose job it is to make money grow. In addition to the money earned, the secret interest of the investment would have been this: it would be he, the servant, who would have chosen the banker for his master... The banker would have received him with deference, as the master's trusted man. The servant would thus have been recognized by someone else as a valued customer and no longer as a servant. Perhaps a new view of himself would have begun to emerge within him.

v. 28

"Take the talent from him and give it to the one who has ten talents."

We do not know who the master is addressing ("take it away from him"), probably those around him.

It is right not to leave this servant with this gift, which, instead of making him grow, has diminished him and even caused him to live in fear. This unfortunate man must therefore be relieved of this indigestible gift. And it is only natural that this unique talent should be given to the one who already has ten, for whom one more will be only a tenth of his current wealth.

v. 29

"For whoever has will be given more, and they will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them."

In this single verse of moral teaching, we find all the characters in the story and what happened to them in this affair. To those who have (what they have) and have been able to appropriate and digest what they have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance. But to those who do not have (what they have), i.e., who have not been able to appropriate and digest what they have received, even what they have will be taken away.

v. 30

"And the useless servant, cast him out into the outer darkness: there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

The master leads the third servant from the darkness within, that of buried talent, which keeps him hidden in fear, to a new darkness, the outer darkness, where repressed feelings can come out in tears and gnashing of teeth. The internal anger that prevented him from believing himself worthy of the gift will now be able to come out, no longer against himself but openly against the other. This rage will no longer be hidden within him, fixing him in the status of servant, burying him in submission and fear of the master. He moves from self-exclusion to exclusion by the other. In this, there is a future.

In what sense is the third servant "useless"? He is useless in the sense that, for this master, a good servant is one who, one day, is no longer a servant. For it is in the advent of the other to sovereignty and joy that the master has placed his own joy and the meaning of his mastery. From then on, the risk that the servant did not dare to take, "throwing" the money at the banker, says the Greek text, is now taken by the master: he himself "throws" him into outer darkness. After withdrawing the gift, the strongly signified exclusion is the only gift the master can still give to the "useless servant." Since wealth and joy could not

become his, anger and sorrow will be the first way the former servant will discover that he is no longer with the master; weeping and gnashing of teeth, the first that, perhaps, he will appropriate...

If the master in the parable represents a god whose lordship allows man to attain lordship, is he not very different from the one who has been given the name "Almighty" and who is believed to be master of everything and everyone, forever? The rich god in the parable might seem destitute in his wealth since he can only give what he has, while his desire proves to be more ambitious: that the other may attain what he himself is. However, this state beyond all servitude, this entry into joy, no one, not even a god, can give to man: he must achieve it, he must rise to it. The god we might believe to be weak reveals himself here to be more than strong. The power to limit oneself, a mysterious power, is something whose true value we do not know at the beginning of life. Would we think of placing above the power that commands a power that does nothing more than let be? Is this god really less powerful than the "almighty god"? Is he not even more powerful, since his way of being divine inspires in others the ability to become divine? Other gods make men. This god allows gods.

Summary and translation by André Gilbert, January 2026