

## THE ECONOMY OF GOD

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### Matthew 25.14-30

“For it will be as when a man going on a journey called his servants and entrusted to them his property; to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. He who had received the five talents went at once and traded with them; and he made five talents more. So also, he who had the two talents made two talents more. But he who had received the one talent went and dug in the ground and hid his master’s money.

Now after a long time the master of those servants came and settled accounts with them. And he who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five talents more, saying, ‘Master, you delivered to me five talents; here I have made five talents more.’ His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a little, I will set you over much; enter into the joy of your master.’ And he also who had the two talents came forward, saying, ‘Master, you delivered to me two talents; here I have made two talents more.’ His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a little, I will set you over much; enter into the joy of your master.’

He also who had received the one talent came forward, saying, ‘Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not winnow; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.’ But his master answered him, ‘You wicked and slothful servant! You knew that I reap where I have not sowed, and gather where I have not winnowed? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and at my coming I should have received what was my own with interest. So take the talent from him, and give it to him who has the ten talents.

For to everyone who has will more be given, and he will have abundance; but from him who has not, even what he has will be taken away. And cast the worthless servant into the outer darkness; there men will weep and gnash their teeth.’

Most ministers use this parable to remind their congregations how well Gospel values fit the American economic system. The sermons usually touch on these capitalist themes:

- + We’re not all created equal, we’re given different talents “each according to his own ability.”
- + Always invest the resources you’re given so they grow.
- + Don’t be like the “wicked and slothful servant” who hid his talent where it didn’t grow at all.
- + Faith is risk; don’t play it safe with your talents.
- + And, there will be an accounting.

But what if the parable means just the opposite? What if the parable is **descriptive**, not **prescriptive**; it doesn’t show how the world **should** work but how the world **does** work. What if the master is not God, the usual interpretation, but represents Empire (Revelation calls him ‘the Beast’), the powers at work in unjust economic structures where the rich get richer, the poor get poorer, exactly, by the way, what happens in the story. After all, the master’s a ‘hard man, who reaps what he doesn’t sow, gathers what he doesn’t winnow.’ That would make the third servant not the bad guy, but a resister, a truth-teller. He rightly identifies the master’s unjust economic privilege, refuses to participate in the sham economic system; and for that, he’s cast out to the margins. He’s the kind of person we’d find Jesus with, the kind of person Jesus people would want to invite to the table. And if we’re brave enough, Jesus implies, we’re called to be the third servant ourselves.

Jesus uses economic language here, so I want to paint a vision of the radical economy of God, how it contrasts with how we normally think about economy in our country, and then its implications for the church.

1. Economy comes from the Greek root **oikos**, ‘household.’ Economy is the management of the household; God’s economy is how we manage God’s household, creation. Who, what is part of God’s household?
2. That means that the economy – how people earn a living, the accumulation of wealth, the production, distribution, and consumption of life’s necessities – it’s all God’s business. God’s justice is about economic justice. And you can see God’s justice most clearly in the life of Jesus.
3. God’s economics is not **only** about how people make a living or how families manage their money. It raises the larger question of economic structures in our country, the global economy, making sure they’re just, human dignity is respected, that community is valued, that they reflect the values and ethic of Jesus.
4. Our faceless, omnipresent market economy emphasizes the opposite, possessive individualism and maximizing profit no matter the human cost. Capitalism’s core doctrine: the sum of each person’s pursuit of their self-interest somehow benefits society as a whole. It’s an interconnected web we’re subject to.

5. Yet, in truth, it undermines the common good and the spirit of democracy. It diminishes our humanity, turns us into little more than hoarders and consumers, like the bumper sticker I've seen, 'He who dies with the most toys wins.' And it turns the gifts of creation – air, water, the earth itself – into mere commodities to be bought and sold, consumed and depleted.
6. Therefore, only those things that can be quantified matter; things that can't be measured – truth, self-sacrifice, love, beauty – are diminished. Note, for example, how funding for the humanities and the arts has been reduced in our kids' educations.
7. So we spend our work lives, our family priorities, our hopes for our kids – we spend them in fear of not having enough rather than for serving a greater moral purpose, more often than not our concerns grounded in scarcity rather than in the abundance of the provision of God.
8. Our rightful desire for security can devolve on a slippery slope to a scarcity-based worldview that reinforces the fear that gave rise to it in the first place. We invest in more efficient killing machines for our military. We militarize our police. And with 'In Gun We Trust' as our creed, the best we can do is offer up empty and dismissive 'thoughts and prayers' as our national placebo. Security, based in fear and scarcity, is what got us into this mess in the first place, and more of the same isn't going to get us out.
9. Make no mistake – there are entire industries, financial institutions, businesses, and churches that benefit from such fear, that reinforce a scarcity-based politics and religion, and so are happy when we tinker at the edges. Martin Luther King, Jr. identified racism, war, and economic exploitation as the three interrelated evils of our day. They feed and they feed off each other; the corporate state needs the poor.
10. And it seems this is what people want. Fox News – an oxymoron if there ever was one – has become a media giant by feeding a constant stream of fear and scarcity, a get-it-for-yourself-while-you-can mixture of politics and civil religion. A 'God-helps-those-who-help-themselves' theology is a lie, and it's certainly not the economy of God. Fear and scarcity sell, and they sell big-time. But that doesn't make them valid.
11. I'm more convinced than ever that the kind of economic inequities in our country could not take place without the religious legitimacy that they're given in the vast majority of churches. This is religious abuse, and it's time for churches of conscience to call it what it is, to be truth-tellers like the third servant, no matter the cost. And part of telling the truth is exposing the lie. Economic oppression cannot exist without its religious justification; and most churches are more than willing accomplices.
12. This theological sleight of hand trumpets two extremes: On the one hand, prosperity preachers preach a gospel of financial blessing: 'God will bring you wealth, if you just believe enough. The harvest will come if you plant a seed,' which means, 'send us your money.' Christianity at a profit.
13. The other is more insidious; they say there's no connection between faith, economy, faith and politics, that you shouldn't talk about these things in church. It's naïve, they say; they encourage charity, not a bad thing. But charity-based care for the poor can be patronizing and a ruse to keep us from addressing the fundamental structural abuses and dehumanization built into our economic system.
14. When you live out of scarcity, there will never be enough. Faith is seen in economy, how individuals, families, and yes, nations use their resources – money, time, energy. Christians of conscience provide a radical vision for an economy based in abundance not scarcity, so that it serves just ends.
15. Pope Francis puts it like this:
 

Just as the commandment 'Thou shalt not kill' sets a limit to safeguard the value of human life, today we also have to say 'thou shalt not' to an economy of exclusion and inequality. Such an economy kills. How can it be that it's *not* news when an elderly homeless person dies of exposure, but it *is* when the stock market loses two points?
16. In God's economy, there's enough for everyone. And since there's enough for everyone, we can live out of abundance and peace, not from scarcity and fear. Security comes not from building walls, more weapons, more money, more stuff, isolating, insulating us even more. Nothing will be enough until you are enough. Security comes when everyone has what they need for a fulfilled life. This will take nothing less than a complete re-ordering of the structures of our economy. And churches of conscience will play a major role with its moral vision.
17. It means quality education, universal health care, social inclusion, meaningful work, a living wage, where the people of God beat their swords into plowshares, spears into pruning hooks, their guns into garden tools – to tend the planet, our home, and all its inhabitants. That's God's economy. That's security.

18. Jesus was a social prophet who led an economic, political, and spiritual movement for those at the bottom of Roman society to promote dignity, freedom, and justice for all people.
19. So if Jesus is the criterion by which we judge our economy, the management of the household, then God's economy is about a home where there's always a place at the table, where you share what's on the table. Home is where all – **all** – are welcome and there's plenty to eat. Ending inequality is possible! Ending poverty, ending hunger is possible! This isn't wishful thinking. God's economy can be a reality!
20. Sharing banishes fear. Generosity fills the cup of scarcity to overflowing, 'my cup runneth over.' If grace is enough, then grace must guarantee that everyone has enough. Generosity multiplies the abundance.
21. So the questions for us, simply, 'What does an economy of grace, a resurrection economy, an economy of abundance... What does the economy of God look like? And are we brave enough to implement it?'
22. How would our lives look different, how would we spend our time different, our families **be** different, our credit card statement, our taxpaying, how would our church life **look** different, how would our country **be** different if we lived as if we **really** believed, if everyone really believed that there's enough, that we **have** enough, that you, that we, that we all ... **are** enough? The economy of God.
23. So will we believe it? That there's enough for everyone. That everyone is welcome at the table, not just this table but the American table. An Easter economy that we can midwife to birth in our families and in our country. 'I came that you might have life,' Jesus said, 'and have it abundantly.' 'The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want.' I ... shall ... not ... want. And you shall not want. And no one shall want. Everyone – a place at the table. Will we have the courage to believe it? And are we ready to put our money where our faith is?

## SOJOURNERS CLASS

Even Martin Luther King, Jr. struggled with this parable. From his unpublished files, *Sermons Not Preached.*

He says that the real lesson is in its application to the moral and spiritual life. The "Law of Accumulation" says that the more you give of yourself the more avenues of goodness are open to you. The truer you are to yourself, the more just you are, the more friends you make, the more truth, justice, friendships accumulate to you. And the contrast, too. The more you lie, the more intolerant or hateful, the easier it becomes to lie, be intolerant, to hate, the more these things accumulate to you. King says that this is a "law of life," a "fundamental truth of the universe." ... ..

Go out and give yourself to some great ideal; go and find your soul, serve humanity. And in the grasping of these you will gain aid from the universe itself which continually gives to him who already has. And in this way, the rich get richer and the poor get poorer.

King's interpretation – feel good spiritualization, King lets us off the hook

Matthew 25.31-46 – 'sheep and goats': 'I was hungry, in prison, naked, and you fed me, visited, clothed me.' And when did I do these things? 'When you did them to the least of my sisters, my brothers, you did them to me.'

Roman rule in Palestine was primarily a system for the extraction of tributes

The ruler received 25% of total income, tiny ruling class (1-2% of population) absorbed another 40%, and the peasant majority, who produced most of the wealth from the land, was left destitute.

Elites then as now create the narrative of meaning to legitimize their rights to power, wealth, and privilege

Also explains the dependence of the masses

How wealth is created and accumulated, and to explain also the profligate consumption of the elites

Stockholm Syndrome – the poor internalize the narratives and are complicit in their own oppression

### A LIBERATION INTERPRETATION

Why did Jesus tell parables? To expose and break the cycle of the system of exploitation and poverty. They reveal exploitation in the world of their hearers. How oppression served the interest of the ruling class.

Jesus, liberator from the Roman pacification system, the exact kind of religion the powers wanted them to have.

We know this for sure about Jesus – he was executed, an enemy of state and temple. The charge? Subversion

The master is not a God figure – a 'harsh man, taking what I did not deposit, reaping what I did not sow' then he gives to those that have more and those that have nothing (the poor) even more will be taken away.

The nobleman is Caesar, or worldly rulers, who want to seize power, who want to reap where they have not sown, to make money without working. The poor in the master's country rightfully hate him.

The rich get richer, the poor get poorer.

When he comes back the third slave instead of being a failure, instead is a protestor against a sham economy

Jesus sides with the poor third servant. A truth-teller. Confronts the unjust economic and political system. Might you be the third servant? By faith!

The Kingdom has a different economy than the empires of this world. Everyone given enough; nothing more, nothing less.

Those who need more, receive more. Trust that God will provide our daily bread as well as curb our desire for excess.

'Give us this day our daily bread' – enough for today. And that's enough.

### SERMON ON THE MOUNT

**MT 6.9-15** Lord's Prayer – Give us this day our daily bread; debts used in MT, hamartia (sin) in LK

**MT 6.19** Do not store up your treasures

**MT 6.24** You cannot serve God and mammon

**MT 6.25-34** Do not worry about your basic needs (food, shelter, clothing) because God will provide

**MT 17.24-27** Jesus and Peter discuss the Temple tax

**MT 22.15-22** Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and unto God the things that are God's.

### PARABLES UNIQUE TO MATTHEW, with economic implications/themes

**MT 13.24-30, 36-43** Parables of the Weeds

**MT 13.44-46** the Hidden Treasure and Pearl

**MT 13.47-50** the Net

**MT 13.51-52** the New and Old Treasures

**MT 20.1-16** the Laborers in the Vineyard

**MT 21.28-32** the Two Sons

**MT 25.1-13** the Ten Bridesmaids

**MT 25.31-46** the sheep and the goats

## **Martin Luther King, Jr. – “Unpublished Papers,” from *Sermons Not Preached***

The more knowledge a man has the more the sources of learning open to him on all side.

The man who IS being praised get more praise.

The man who has many friends has many running to him; to him who has friends, friends are given.

The real issue of our text appears, however, in its application to the moral life or the spiritual.

Goodness and badness have the same law of accumulation

The more a man gives himself to goodness the more other avenues of goodness open to him

The more true, the more just, the more honest one is the easier it is to be honest. Likewise, the more he lies the easier it is to lie The more he hates the easier it is to hate.

My friend there is a law of accumulation by which sin and goodness increase each after its own kind.

There is something that makes the good grow better and the evil worse Since this is a law of life, a fundamental truth Its value lies in the fact that in whatever direction a man choses to develop his life he has the aid of the universe.

If a man chooses to be bad the universe multiplies his badness. On the other hand, if a man recognizes his badness and tries to be good, he finds all the world declaring a disposition towards him, helping him on in the way which he has chosen

### **THE ECONOMY OF GOD**

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1. Oikos = household. Economics is about the management of the household.
2. God's justice is about economic justice.
3. God's economic justice is not only personal but political.
4. Our market economy emphasizes individualism and maximizing profit.
5. It makes the creation mere commodities.
6. Only things that can be measured count
7. Our lives based in the fear of not having enough.
8. Our rightful desire for security can devolve in a scarcity-based worldview that increases hate and violence.
9. There are many institutions, including churches, that benefit from a scarcity-based politics and religion.
10. This is what people want. Fear and scarcity sells.
11. Economic oppression needs religious legitimization.
12. Two extremes – the first, the “prosperity gospel.”
13. The second says that faith and economics/politics don't mix; the dangers of charity.
14. Faith is made real in the economy.
15. Pope Francis: “A 'thou shalt not' to an economy of exclusion and inequality.”
16. In God's economy, there's enough for everyone.
17. God's economy includes concerns for the entire planet.
18. Jesus is the criterion of the economy of God. Everyone has a seat at the table.
19. Generosity multiplies abundance.
20. What does the economy of God look like?
21. How would your life look differently in God's economy?
22. Will we believe?