

What are "talents"? (Matthew 25:14-30)

***Talanta* doesn't refer to a special ability I have, my passion in life, or this little light of mine. It certainly isn't a mere \$100.**

by [James C. Howell](#) in the [November 1, 2005](#) issue

Clarence Jordan used to say that a parable from Jesus was like a Trojan horse: You let it in, and Bam!—it's got you. But this business about the "talents" has never quite "gotten" me. Yes, it has that marvelous, often-quoted line, "Well done, good and faithful servant." I've tried that in a funeral sermon or two, but its emotional impact on the congregation is soured for me, as a voice (St. Augustine? Laocoön warning me to look inside the horse?) whispers darkly, "You're doing the works-righteousness scam."

It's November. How many churches have used this Trojan horse of the talents in their fall stewardship campaigns? "God has blessed you, don't be like the wicked servant, pledge to us, it's an investment in the kingdom." So many schemes exploit this theme: time-talent surveys, spiritual-gifts inventories—all good and worthy instruments. But I'm not sure this is what Jesus had in mind.

Many churches are snapping up boxfuls of a little book called *The Kingdom Assignment*, the story of pastor Denny Bellesi, who doled out \$10,000 in \$100 increments to church members one Sunday, with three requirements: The \$100 belongs to God. You must invest it in God's work. Report your results in 90 days. The reports were startling: people made money hand over fist to contribute to the church, creative ministries were hatched, lives were transformed, people wept for joy—and it was all covered by NBC's *Dateline*. So why did I shudder a little when a church member brought me the book and said, "Let's do this"? It feels so American. In the culture, and now in church, we're dealin', we're investing—more is better, we think. Why should I give somebody \$100 and say, "This belongs to God," implying that the other half million in his investment portfolio is his?

Jesus was talking about “talents,” a most unfortunate translation of the Greek *talanta*. A “talent” isn’t a special ability I have, my passion in life or this little light of mine, and it certainly isn’t a mere \$100. Jesus wasn’t saying, “Use what is in you, invest what you have for the kingdom.” He was talking about a coin that was the largest denomination of currency in the first-world system. We should translate *talanta* as “a huge bucket full of solid gold” or “a bank CEO megabonus” or “winning the Ohio Lottery.” Only the muscular could even pick up a *talanton*, which might weigh 50 or 75 pounds. Each was worth around 6,000 denarii, which today would be more than I’ve earned in my 25 years in the ministry, or 20 of those flasks of pure nard Mary used on the feet of Jesus.

This amount would stagger any recipient and send him into utterly uncharted territory. A Mediterranean laborer wouldn’t have any more of a clue about how to invest five *talanta* than the guy who bags my groceries would about \$74 million (even if I and all my friends tried to advise him). Jesus (who had never personally seen that kind of money) used an outlandish hyperbole to symbolize the gospel. What value would Jesus attach to the gospel? It is the pearl of great price, it is like the Torah of old, “more precious than gold”; you sell all you have and don’t notice the door slamming behind you as you sprint after this Jesus.

And the servants are not individual believers. We get suckered into thinking of our autonomous life with God, God giving us *talanta*. But these servants are the church, a corporate body to whom the gospel has been entrusted. The rewards are not neat progress reports after 90 days, but the joy of the messianic banquet.

What about the dumb, wicked servant? In Jesus’ day, burying money was regarded as prudent, and the servant no doubt expected to be commended. But he got a verbal thrashing from the master. If this parable is Jesus’ intimation that an astonishingly ravishing gift has been unloaded upon an unsuspecting church that has not the faintest notion how to handle it, then might it be that the parable solicits from us not the offering up of our individual abilities, but rather the frank, embarrassing admission of our corporate inability? We populate church committees with the best people for the task at hand, and in meetings they confidently offer insights from their education and professional experience. But maybe what God needs is people who will huddle up, shake their heads and confess, “We just have no idea; the treasure is too big, too heavy.” Maybe then, and only then, we can dare something for God. God gives the gospel not to me so my ability can be put to good use, but to us so our inability might be exposed and God thereby glorified.

This thought process could ruin a financial campaign. Or would it? As it is, we print up catchy mailings, we wheedle and cajole; pledges bump up by 7 percent, and we celebrate. Isn't that the equivalent of the burial of the one *talanton*, and isn't it the harbinger of the burial of the church? The gospel isn't being unleashed if some percentage of church members start to think of an extra \$100 or so as belonging to God, or even if the most clever stewardship campaign in history magically seduced a majority of mainline Protestants into tithing. The gospel is too big for such trifles. Surely it is only to the dumbfounded, to the clueless, to the overwhelmed, to those who are under no illusion that they have ever known quite what to do because of Jesus and don't pretend it could ever be otherwise—to those alone that this crafter of Trojan horses says, "Well done, good and faithful servant."