

Deep in the hole (Matthew 25:14-30)

Once the servant digs the hole, is there any way out?

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I wonder about that hole in the ground, the one dug by the servant in Jesus' parable of the talents. Does he dig it by his own choice, or on account of the choices of others? And, once it has been dug, is there any way out?

In brief, the parable is this: Before going on a journey, a wealthy man distributes a varying number of "talents" to three of his servants. While he is gone, the first two servants double the value of their talents. The third servant receives one talent, which he protects by burying it in the ground. When the wealthy man returns, the first two servants are rewarded handsomely, but the third receives judgment and punishment.

I suspect that most people today, if they picture this parable in their minds, imagine the servant dropping something like a silver dollar into a small hole at the base of a tree or beneath a rock—the way my grandmother once claimed to have hidden a small jar of coins behind the garden. After she died, my uncles repeatedly scoured the yard with metal detectors in a fruitless attempt to locate the buried treasure. Years later we discovered a jar of silver dollars tucked behind a can of seed-beans on a shelf above her washing machine. It turns out that "behind the garden" meant something different to Grandma than it did to the rest of us.

Jesus' parables are like that. They invite listeners—even require us—to puzzle over their potential meanings.

In any case, the value of one talent was significantly greater than a silver dollar. It was worth about 15 years' wages, and it weighed approximately 50 pounds. (Those values vary geographically and across time.)

Jesus is not speaking about a coin. He's speaking about a fortune. And it's a heavy fortune at that, requiring substantial effort to excavate a hole deep enough to keep it safe—even if no one had a metal detector in the first century.

No wonder the third servant is afraid. This money does not belong to him. If he fails to protect such a large sum, he'll be in the hole for the entire amount. But if he does not increase its value by taking a risk, the wealthy man will bury him.

It is a lose-lose predicament: damned if he digs, damned if he doesn't. He is so far down in the hole, there is no way out.

No way out, that is, unless there exists a Savior. Not a Savior who thrusts the predicament upon you and leaves, but one who promises to be present always, even to the end of the age—no matter how deep the hole.