

Faithful slaves: Matthew 25:14-30

by [Andrew Warner](#) in the [November 4, 2008](#) issue

Did the “worthless slave” know the story of the foolish bridesmaids? When they did not preserve the oil for their lamps, the women were locked out of the party. We could understand why, if the slave knew that story, he would focus on preserving his money. But now he is locked out while the bridesmaids cry until their mascara runs, and all gnash their teeth. We’re left to wonder, “Just what do you do in an apocalypse?”

The worthless slave might have heard Jesus’ teaching on the apocalypse, especially those times when Jesus foresaw great tribulations that would require great endurance from his disciples. Jesus gloomily advised, “And because of the increase of lawlessness, the love of many will grow cold. But the one who endures to the end will be saved.” Or maybe the slave heard the preacher say, “The Lord will come like a thief in the night.” Determined to endure a Lord who is like a robber, the slave buried the money. Perhaps he was comforted by the thought that “when my master comes I shall be like God, who brings out for his people ‘the treasures of darkness, riches stored in secret places.’”

But these thoughts led the worthless slave astray. It turns out that preservation is not the same as preparation, and endurance is not simply ending up where you started.

Of course, the person Jesus describes is not an actual person but a caricature, a foil for you and for me, someone who shows our own potential for folly when we hear Jesus and quote scripture, especially about the eschaton.

The people in my congregation can’t hear this story without thinking of the stock market. We have our endowment—a few “talents”—invested in equities. At first our returns seemed like those of the trusted slaves, but now our investments have fallen significantly, and we find ourselves a talent short. If we had followed the example of the worthless slave and buried our talents we might seem like financial geniuses now; at least we would have outperformed the market. But if the rapture comes today, we will face the indelicate problem of having fewer talents than we did a year

ago.

Our problem of the talents raises the problem of preservation: What really matters—both in the end and in the meantime?

Conversations about the endowment often revolve around how to preserve the principal. How much we can withdraw without risking it: 4 percent or 5 percent? There is great anxiety about this and deep worry about the years when we have taken out more. Like wise virgins we want to make sure our principal is intact for a future day.

But Jesus calls us to something other than mere preservation. All three slaves received talents that did not belong to them, money that was given but not earned. This gift of talents was an act of generosity, a bequest from their master, an indication of trust in their management.

The two trustworthy slaves doubled their money (no doubt a case of astute market timing). Perhaps they knew that a man selling oil at midnight could set his own price when bridesmaids are desperate. Yet it was a particular audacity that allowed them to double their money, a willingness to risk what they were given.

They risked buying high and selling low, as many in the U.S. have done this past year with houses and stocks. How would the master have responded to a slave who risked all in the Jericho olive oil futures market and lost every talent?

Luckily the slaves' gamble paid off. It is easy to miss that what they truly doubled was the audacity of the first gift. They were given something amazing—a reckless, unearned, unheard-of trust. Recognizing the daring of their master, they responded with daring, courageously doubling both the *principal* of the bequest and the *principle* behind it.

The worthless slave did not understand what he'd been given. This is the mistake we make when we worry about preserving the principal of our endowments. What if instead we responded to the daring generosity of those who gave us the funds in the first place?

Jean Hutchinson gave our congregation a remarkable gift. When we needed a piano, she gave us one; when we had a deficit, she covered it. It was not a surprise that when she died, she gave us a sizable bequest. But her gift was more than a bequest

of money. Once, when many of our members were disparaging a new hymnal, Jean said simply, "I like the new songs." Her life was marked by a deep generosity and a love for the church that could not be preserved simply by keeping to a 5 percent draw.

We have received other gifts of daring generosity. When we are called to account, the question will be not how it is that we preserved the balance sheet or the bricks and mortar, but whether we emulated others' daring and doubled it, taking audacious action to preserve principle over principal.