

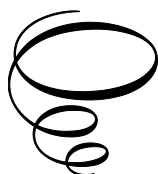
Contemporary Issues in Christian Sociology

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By

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In memory of
My Mum and Dad
For the respect of Scripture that they taught me

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PREFACE

Many are unaware that Scripture can often provide practical guidance for engaging with social problems that may seem insurmountable. This book enables readers to reflect on the wisdom found in Scripture, which addresses contemporary challenges faced in daily life, offering scriptural guidelines for practical solutions. *Contemporary Issues in Christian Sociology* is a compilation of my articles and essays published in the peer-reviewed Journal for Sociological Integration of Religion and Society, Journal of Sociology and Christianity, Janadeepa Pune Journal of Religious Studies, and the Asian Journal of Religious Studies. This book aims to have a secular appeal and attempts to encourage readers to think critically about the intersection of faith and society, offering practical insights into how Christian communities can be proactive in addressing the needs of the vulnerable and promoting social harmony. *Contemporary Issues in Christian Sociology* hopes to serve as a bridge between ancient wisdom and present-day realities. It invites readers to reflect deeply on their own roles within society and challenges them to respond to social problems not only with compassion but also with informed, faith-based action.

Contemporary Issues in Christian Sociology is divided into two sections. Part 1 highlights aspects of Scripture that guide engagement with everyday matters, while Part 2 focuses on specific social issues, exploring how Scripture offers meaningful ways to engage with life. *Contemporary Issues in Christian Sociology* is primarily intended for a general readership; it is hoped that this work will also be valued within social science courses and find a place in university libraries.

Chapter 1, "The Promise that Scripture Holds for Informing Economic Thought – An Investigation of The Parable of the Talents," draws attention to Biblical literature that is often overlooked in comprehensive studies of wealth and poverty. Some interpreters of the Parable of the Talents appreciate its profit-making aspects and view it as a form of praise for a simple form of capitalism. This chapter addresses various economic concepts at different points in its narrative, including risk management approaches for handling assets within a likely market-driven economy, with the intention of enhancing one's portfolio. The key message is that profits generated by productivity should be rewarded, while the opportunity costs incurred from a lack of initiative will inevitably face negative consequences.

The emotional aspect of fear, particularly the risk of loss, serves as a motivating factor for investment in enterprise.

Important elements of the parable's lesson include the recognition of individual abilities, fair distribution of resources, clear expectations, and performance evaluation concerning stewardship of assets by the owner of capital. In a world that often prioritizes material possessions, adopting a Scripture-based approach to managing resources and creating value can have a profoundly positive impact on the economic challenges that society faces.

Chapter 2, "Engaging with Scripture: Naysayers in Their Own Vernacular – Propositioning the Kingdom of Heaven," addresses the ongoing controversy between theologians and rationalists regarding the mysticism inherent in Scripture. This dispute arises partly from the ambiguous language used by each group, which is often incomprehensible to the other. Each side is determined to use its own terminology to justify its position. In contrast, Jesus was intentional in choosing local symbols, examples, and metaphors when teaching through parables, ensuring that people of his time and place could easily understand the intended meaning of his messages.

In Chapter 3, titled "The Lord's Prayer - The Ultimate Moral Exemplar," it is emphasized that the "Our Father" is not only the most frequently recited prayer but also one of the most revered texts in the Bible for nearly two thousand years. However, there appears to be a consistent reluctance to explore its meaning in depth or to promote it as a foundational model for social practices. Embracing the sentiments expressed by Jesus in His dialogue with His Heavenly Father has long been a challenge for those who promote ideals contrary to the Lord's Prayer and who often benefit from the resulting injustices. Nevertheless, this essay discusses how engaging with the Lord's Prayer can serve as a framework for a moral order, guiding societies to operate with a deeper purpose that recognizes the value of all life.

Chapter 4, titled "Compassionate Care of the Dying Evokes Grace and Gratitude," argues that providing compassionate care to individuals in extreme distress can cultivate a sense of gratitude that has the potential to redeem their suffering. This transformation enables their misery to acquire new meanings related to life and immortality. Research has shown that the ability to feel gratitude is positively correlated with life satisfaction, psychological well-being, and a sense of coherence—meaning that life feels manageable, meaningful, and understandable. Additionally, the emotional relief provided by compassionate care is unlikely to prompt critically ill individuals to hasten their departure from life before its natural time.

Chapter 5, "Refugees Create Opportunities for Community Good," raises concerns about the attitudes of several wealthy nations' governments toward refugees, particularly in relation to the principle of non-refoulement. Many of their policies aimed at restricting refugee applications appear to be driven by demagogues promoting nationalist and anti-immigration agendas. A significant portion of the population in rich countries often fails to recognize how much their lifestyles are enriched by the contributions of refugee migrants, who bring unique perspectives and flavours to the multicultural societies in which they live. The opportunities to enhance this diversity are frequently overlooked and underappreciated.

In a capitalist world that constantly emphasises acquisition as a measure of success, there is a pervasive fear of not having enough to advance. However, groups and organizations that understand the Christian ethos and are motivated by goodwill toward refugees can use a resonant soundbite in public discourse that echoes the core theme of the miracle of the loaves and fishes: a spirit of gratitude for engaging in acts of kindness and goodness.

In Chapter 6: In "Hinging Debt Relief to Probity," an often-overlooked aspect of debtors' subservient attitudes toward creditors is brought to light. Although debt has historically driven the progress of civilization, it has also employed some of the darker aspects of human nature. Jesus recognized the various perversions that can arise from debt recovery and illustrated how creditors should administer debt relief with integrity, without taking advantage of debtors.

Chapter 7, "Putting Stock in Fleeting Temporal Affirmations is Treading on a Slippery Slope," discusses how affirmations on social media have become a measure of one's success or failure. In today's world, where social media is pervasive, users often receive affirmations for their achievements. This can create a sense of validation and joy. However, these commendations are often short-lived. To maintain this uplifting feeling, individuals must continuously receive positive affirmations. While these positive messages can add to a person's sense of worth, they do not necessarily reflect the true quality or potential instilled by God. When these affirmations cease and, worse, when negative comments arise, feelings of depression can increase. While it's important to acknowledge the complexities of dealing with depression, it may be helpful to remember the words of Apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians 3:5: "Not that we are competent of ourselves to claim anything as coming from us; our competence is from God." Additionally, in Isaiah 43:4, God assures humanity that we are precious and honoured in His sight. We don't have to constantly improve our performance to earn His love..

In Chapter 8, "Reaching Out to the Lonely Against the Odds of Social Constraints," loneliness is described as a modern affliction affecting people around the world. In Christian engagement with society, a key aspect of God's second great commandment—love for one's neighbour—is the importance of providing understanding and support to the vulnerable members of our community. To truly understand someone is to help heal their wounds and inspire them to embrace restoration within themselves.

The Christian spirit recognizes that remaining present for those who are lonely can be challenging, but it acknowledges that it is even more difficult for those who feel abandoned. By cultivating relationships with lonely individuals, extending care, and encouraging them, as Jesus did when he engaged with the distraught man by the pool (John 5:5-16), encouraging him to "pick up their mat and walk," we can reach out to the lonely despite societal constraints. If such outreach became a widespread practice, the social constructs that limit our engagement with those who are lonely would ultimately be challenged and diminished.

In Chapter 9: "The Conundrum of Social Distancing and the Benefits of Physical Touching," social distancing raises the question of whether it is okay to touch one another or refrain from doing so. Stigmatizing something as natural as touch due to concerns about infection transmission or its unfortunate association with assault can have detrimental effects on our culture and society. Such stigma could rob us of the healing benefits that touch provides.

Both cultural traditions and empirical research demonstrate the positive effects of touch on our health. A gentle, soothing touch activates low-threshold nerve receptors in our skin, which are connected to nerve cells that transmit pleasurable sensations to the brain. When we touch another person with sensitivity, we convey warm feelings that can be especially comforting to those in need of support.

During the time of Jesus, emotions were often expressed through touch, including healing experiences sought through physical contact. The synoptic gospels mention several instances where individuals who were ill or in distress sought relief by reaching out to touch Jesus or by being touched by him. People were so convinced that they would be healed simply by touching him that they pressed forward, hoping even to touch the fringe of his garment to experience his healing power (Luke 6:19, Matthew 14:36, Mark 3:10).

Chapter 10, "Leadership in Families," emphasizes the importance of values of forgiveness, kindness, and faith in creating an environment where all family members feel connected to a unified system. This sense of cohesion encourages collaboration toward shared goals while also promoting

individual growth. These values, nurtured within the family, are described by Pope Paul as the "first school of love." They help cultivate social propriety, cultural sensitivity, and economic prudence, enabling family members to participate effectively in society.

Every family member, regardless of their individual traits, plays a vital role in the family collective, as illustrated in Paul's teachings to the Corinthians (12:12-27). Each person reflects God's handiwork in their creation. When leadership is shared according to each member's strengths, it allows everyone to contribute to fulfilling God's mission for the family. The concept of shared leadership is also present in Christian theology, where authority is distributed among God the Father, God the Son, and the Holy Spirit, all of whom are "of the same substance."

In Chapter 11, "A Tale of the Palpable Tension Between Social Justice and Utilitarianism," explores the dynamic interplay between these two ethical frameworks, illustrated by the parable of the labourers in the vineyard found in Matthew 20:1-16. In this parable, workers are hired at different times yet receive the same wages, creating tension in wage distribution and leaving some workers dissatisfied. However, the Owner believes he has treated all workers fairly.

Ultimately, both utilitarianism and social justice can be reconciled when guided by divine principles. While these frameworks are distinct, they are not inherently incompatible. Utilitarianism can be a useful tool for achieving social justice goals, and social justice can help foster a more utilitarian society by promoting equality and well-being for everyone.

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PART 1

CHAPTER 1

THE PROMISE THAT SCRIPTURE HOLDS FOR INFORMING ECONOMIC THOUGHT - INVESTIGATION OF THE PARABLE OF THE TALENTS

Introduction

It is indeed intriguing that little attempt has been made to consciously relate scripture to the discipline of economics. Scripture has been largely ignored by those writing comprehensive studies of wealth and poverty. One would imagine the collapse of communism, inspired by Marxist economics, and the vileness of capitalism that brought the world to financial ruin, would be a strong motivation to consider reconfiguring economic thought from time-tested Scriptural wisdom. Perhaps there is a suspicion that matters relating to wealth are a direct antithesis of what Christ preached. Prospecting for any cues that his teaching could provide for prudent money management would be a case of matters easy on the heart but hard on the mind

Nevertheless, at the risk of proffering opinion profoundly at odds with what is generally accepted, this article intends to examine the prospects of scripture providing prudent cues to the economic discipline for the creation and management of value, namely, the performance of actions that increase the worth of goods and services to a significantly larger number of people.

The Parable of the Talents is overwhelmingly viewed by a majority of commentators as an eschatological allegory. According to Rohrbaugh (1993), piquantly, the parable has also some western interpreters relishing the profit-making elements of the parable and seeing in it nothing less than praise for a homespun capitalism on the lips of Jesus. This article, having no predicated deference to this point of view, will proceed to investigate the Parable of the Talents about its application to the management of resources and creation of value in contemporary living (as opposed to an eschatological approach).

The Parable of the Talents - Matthew 25:14-30 (English Standard Version) ¹⁴“For it will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants[a] and entrusted to them his property. ¹⁵To one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. ¹⁶He who had received the five talents went at once and traded with them, and he made five talents more. ¹⁷So also he who had the two talents made two talents more. ¹⁸But he who had received the one talent went and dug in the ground and hid his master’s money. ¹⁹Now after a long time the master of those servants came and settled accounts with them. ²⁰And 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.’ ²¹His 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.’ ²²And he also who had the two talents came forward, saying, ‘Master, you delivered to me two talents; here I have made two talents more.’ ²³His 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.’ ²⁴He 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 scattered no seed, ²⁵so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.’ ²⁶But his master answered him, ‘You wicked and slothful servant! You knew that I reap where I have not sown and gather where I scattered no seed? ²⁷Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and at my coming I should have received what was my own with interest. ²⁸So take the talent from him and give it to him who has the ten talents. ²⁹For to everyone who has will more be given, and he will have an abundance. But from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. ³⁰And cast the worthless servant into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’

Problem

The Parable of the Talents, as related by Matthew 25: 14-30, is confusing because the central message appears to severely contrast with the moral pathway to God. The moral conflict arises when the master admonishes the servant with whose performance he is displeased “--- “You knew that I reap where I have not sown and gather where I scattered no seed? 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”. The lack of attention to the problematic material in the Parable of the Talents in major studies of wealth

and poverty is a serious deficiency. It is important to still deal with the economic problems that lie in the surface details of this parable and not think that allegorizing excuses one from attending to the issue. According to Mimier King (2013), we simply cannot leave unaddressed how it is that Jesus can condemn Mammon as a rival to God and at the same time use mammon-acquisition as a model for the kingdom, or how the same Jesus can say at one time “some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last” (Lk 13:30) and at another time “to all those who have, more will be given; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away.” (Lk 19:26).

Background

The master had entrusted to each of his three servants five talents, two talents and one talent respectively after recognising the ability of each. Commentaries on the Parable of the Talents variously represent talents as “opportunities” presented to the servants while emphasising that opportunities are not the same as “abilities”. Opportunity is a time or set of circumstances that makes it possible to do something, and ability is the possession of the means or skill to do it. However, the parable harps on the numeric outcome of cultivating the talents. While productivity of talents may result in further opportunities, it is not clear to see how these resultant opportunities can be ascribed numerals (five talents more, two talents more). It appears reasonable, therefore, that “talents” as referred to in the parable are represented as productive assets that naturally lend themselves to be quantified.

Areas of Intrigue

The story is silent about the wealth of the master who entrusted his property to his servants before he went away. We are not told the business of the man, where he was going and for how long. We are not aware if the property was inherited or was largely earned, and if the portfolio of the property was distributed over land and other possessions. We are not made aware of the number of servants the man had, and therefore we are unable to make out whether his substantive possessions included more than three human assets or slaves, as servants were likely to be his bonded labour.

While all the facts referred to as missing in the parable may not be immediately relevant to the moral the parable intended to convey, this information is germane to the mindset or the expectation of the master of his servants when appropriating the property to them and also the

accompanying emotion of each of the three servants when the property was parcelled to each of them for their stewardship.

For instance, if the man had earned a significant part of his property, behavioural economists will assert that it is likely that the master is aware of the risks of different methods to maximize the return on his assets, having personally evidenced his changing fortunes arising from approaches that were more successful than others. On the other hand, if all or a significant part of his property portfolio was inherited, the man's management of his property portfolio could be very different from the manner in which he himself built up his assets.

Moreover, the approach to different elements of the master's property that may have included land, material possessions and human assets would warrant different strategies for growing his wealth. Based on the master's objectives for each asset class, he would decide how much of the return to put back into each asset category and grow his wealth and how much to take as income. Further, different times would give different levels of return on each asset class. There are years, for instance, when the harvest is not large simply because of the inconsistencies in the weather; also, political and economic conditions might be differently conducive to turning in the best of returns at the times that the master was away. Therefore, to manage fluctuating fortunes, it would be relevant for the servants to know the time span over which the asset returns are calculated.

Discussions

Allocation of Talents

The master knew the abilities of each of his servants and accordingly entrusted the talents to them to different extents. Recognition of ability and equitable allocation of resources are key factors in the parable's instruction. The apportionment of talents based on the servants' natural inequalities though ostensibly fair, can foreshadow a meaning other than what is often conventionally believed when one considers what Dunoyer (1845), one of the early proponents of economic cycles, asserted about unequal abilities: "superior abilities are the source of everything that is great and useful --- Reduce everything to equality and you will bring everything to a standstill". One sometimes hears the same thought expressed today in the idea that resources in the hands of the most talented individuals will increase their productivity many times over. This argument is often used to justify extreme inequalities and to defend the privileges of the winners without much consideration for the losers.

Productivity of the Talents

Notably, the owner of the capital does not specify his expectation of the assets' productivity. Importantly, none of the three servants to whom the property was appropriated for stewardship was given any background of the history of asset behaviour and was therefore left to their ingenuity to manage them. While the value given to each is specified, we are not told the quality or character of the talents given to the servants. It is reasonable to assume that each servant would bring a relevant approach to grow the talent (s) in the manner and style of their master.

Nonetheless, when away, it appears that the master expected the mechanisms of the marketplace to direct his servants to increase his asset value. Since the market mechanism, in conventional economic thinking, is regarded as similar to natural law, arguably, no ethical aspersions can be laid on the master's expectation of his servants' performance. However, Max Weber (1920) calls this sort of master less slavery the quintessence of capitalism. According to Weber, in this slavery, without slave owners being present, into which capitalism ensnares workers, prescribed behaviour is foreshadowed for them (in all essentials) on pain of punishment by objective situations and has the character of slaves labouring to serve their owner for an impersonal material goal (p.264). Therefore, explicit edicts or directions from the master to his servants for achieving an expected return on assets put under the servants' stewardship were not considered necessary when he was going away.

It is against this background that the three servants are required to deliver to their master what would warrant the master's accolades, "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", or the severe retribution, "You wicked and slothful servant! - And cast the worthless servant into the outer darkness." The parable makes it clear that *profits* arising from *productivity* are to be rewarded, while opportunity costs arising from lack of *enterprise* will inevitably be *penalised*.

There is likely to be sympathy for the third servant for the punishment meted out to him for not multiplying the one talent that was entrusted to him. After all, he was considered to have the least of the abilities of the three servants. Arguably, he was a cautious person, with perhaps a conservative character who took his role literally as simply being a custodian of his master's wealth- something he probably was doing as caretaker as long as he was bonded to his master and under his supervision, and he continued doing what he knew he did best. Being a venture capitalist was a new deposition to the third servant. On one hand, it seems that there is not enough information in the parable to allow us to make a true assessment of

each of the servants' efforts. However, given that Jesus' narrative emphasises that the master's judgment of his servants' performance is unequivocal, we must accept that the background is lucid enough to instruct us in the moral of the parable.

Inherently, life presents each of us with different levels and characters of wherewithal. Similarly, nature has also bestowed different countries with different competencies to make their assets productive; just as in the Lord's house, where there are many rooms (and if it were not so, the Lord would have told us - John 14:2). Implicit in what Jesus says is that every one of creation is bestowed with some resource. Hence, there was no need for the master to explain to his wards or to bring to attention the character and quality of the talents which the servants are required to make productive. There is, however, an undeniable expectation on the servants to grow the master's wealth. Growth is a fundamental precept of any economic system. It is only the approaches to growth that economists will differ (Adam Smith, Keynes, Ricardo, etc.).

Motivation to grow the productivity of assets is invariably driven by fear and greed. In this parable, fear is clearly the driver of each of the servants' efforts. In the case of the servants who doubled their talents, they were obviously driven by the risk of falling out of favour with their master. These two servants had, however, read their master's work ethic correctly. When working with the master, these two servants had instructed themselves, had warranted the master's trust and knew what his parameters of success were. Naturally, their master was quick to compliment them as *good* and *faithful* servants for emulating his work ethic when they were found to have doubled the talents put under their stewardship. Referring to them as "good" is the ultimate compliment that the master could pay his two servants, because Jesus qualifies in Mark 10:18 when he was referred to as a "good master" that "No one is good--except God alone", denying himself this ultimate accolade.

Greed, which is often quoted as the driving motivation for humans to grow their wealth (and considered the bane of all economic systems), is an emotion that is not contended within the parable. The servants were only custodians of the master's property, and all the productivity dividends were to be attached to the master's estate. Having no claim to any gains from the talents apportioned to them, the servants did not need to hanker for this indulgence. Unfortunately, there is no generally accepted research on the biochemistry of greed except that greed is a hedonistic emotion exogenous to human nature and, like a barnacle, can easily be cauterised and prevented from spreading even though it may feed into situations that often trigger fear

of the unjust gain, as cautioned in Proverbs 15:27 ("He who is greedy for gain troubles his own house, But he who hates bribes will live").

The third servant, who also worked closely with the master to have warranted his trust, did not appear to have understood his master's approach to his asset management. The servant suggested that his master's work ethic was unfair and expected unreasonable outcomes ("-- a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you scattered no seed, ---"). The servant claimed that it was his master's exploitative approach that filled him with a consuming fear that impelled him to take a conservative approach and protect his asset rather than risk losing it. When playing for safety, the servant unwittingly absolves himself of planning and other effort that is required to make the asset productive. The third servant, unfortunately, allowed his behaviour to be regulated by fear and allowed his character to morph into one of degeneracy. Obsessed with the anxiety of negative outcomes of losing the little he had, the third servant did not even deposit his limited asset in a risk-free strategy that would at least have given some return, albeit small (like keeping the asset with the bankers). At the time of assessment, he was therefore called wicked and declared slothful. Intriguingly, the servant is referred to as slothful. It is not as if he did nothing - he actually "dug in the ground and hid his master's money." The term sloth is defined as the reluctance to work or make an effort, and it appears that lack of enterprise is also considered slothful. The cost of inefficient economic behaviour and sloth is truly evidenced in the punishment meted out to the third servant.

Risk associated with enterprise is an essential element of creating wealth. In other words risk management is fundamental to making the best use of an asset by either extracting cash from its intrinsic value, using the productive proceeds of the asset to diversify or expand the productive capacity of the asset or even borrowing against the asset to grow the portfolio. The third servant consumed by fear did not quite see the upside of taking a risk management approach to the asset under his care. He had not absorbed the ethos of his master to manage his assets in his manner. Evidently the servant did not realize that the talent when cultivated in the name of God and for God, the asset is bound to be productive for it is promised that *whatsoever shall be asked in my name, that will I do, that the Father may be glorified* (John 14:13). The other two servants apparently grew the asset in the manner and style of their master and were justifiably honoured as good and faithful. In view of the two servants have shown evidence of delivering while they were apprenticed ("You have been faithful over a little"), their master justified reposing in them a bigger remit and an invitation to share his privileges ("I will set you over much. Enter

into the joy of your master” --- “For to everyone who has will more be given, and he will have an abundance.”).

On the other hand, the servant who had not risked the investment in a manner uncharacteristic of his master, but ascribed fear of punishment if lost, was severely admonished (“- -from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. And cast the worthless servant into the outer darkness. In that place, there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth”). When making his appraisal of his servant’s performance, the master intends to make the offending terms of reference very clear by repeating his servant’s disparaging remarks as his premise for securing the talent, “You knew that I reap where I have not sown and gather where I scattered no seed?) And then appends causality to his servant’s argument, viz, “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.” Matthew 7:2 appears to have resonance in the master’s assessment of his servant’s performance, namely, “The standard you use in judging is the standard by which you will be judged.”

There is a strong suggestion in the parable that the heavy lifters will be rewarded accordingly. There is no gainsaying that posting equivalent growth rates from a bigger base is more challenging than when growing from a smaller base. It is then reasonable for the master to show greater regard for the servant who was able to double the talent value from five to ten, as against the servant who grew the talent value from two to four. Accordingly, the servant who was entrusted with five talents to start with was given the additional talent that was taken away from the slothful servant (“So take the talent from him and give it to him who has the ten talents).

It is not clear from the parable what would have been the first servant’s fate if he had not doubled the talents, considering that he was considered to be the most capable of the three servants and therefore was given the stewardship of a larger number of talents. Would his performance of anything less than double be as celebrated?! Perhaps one can get a cue from Luke 12: 48 “From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked.” This seems to be an economic prescription to people and countries bestowed with natural competencies to maximise their asset productivity. It is a fundamental economic principle that after meeting obligatory costs of an enterprise, the profits, ensuing from the productivity of a resource, are best utilised if ploughed back to add to existing resource capital. The augmented resource is inevitably then available to improve its productive capacity in future. In other words, productive resources beget additional resources- a reward, as it were, for being able to increase or add

value. So, it is no surprise that the master averred that the one talent be taken from the slothful servant and given to him who has the ten talents, rationalising that to everyone who has, more will be given, and he will have an abundance. The expectation of the “abundance” is, however, that for those who have been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked. Here again, basic accounting principle instructs that resources will languish as a liability until and unless the resource is appropriately applied as a (productive) asset so that the ledger is balanced. On the other hand, attempts to simply retain/protect the implicit value of the resource are counterproductive because the costs of doing so willy-nilly depreciate the resource value. Small wonder then that the servant who simply handed back the conserved value of the talent he was entrusted with was severely reprimanded for being inefficient. This servant, by his action of not being enterprising, resulted in not making productive use of the talent/resource, thus exemplifying inefficient economic behaviour.

Talents as an Indulgence

On the other hand, is there an implied suggestion that those with lesser talents are not expected to be productive anywhere near those endowed with a greater number of talents (To one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, *to each according to his ability*)?! In the Parable of the Sower (Matthew 13), Jesus seems to imply that the quantity and quality of talent that one possesses is a *random* endowment not unlike the outcome from the unwitting *felling* of the sower’s seeds, drawn by pure gravity, on different terrain. It appears that various amounts of ¹seed may not find their place on fertile ground, having been *felled* on paths, shallow soil or thorns. A strong suggestion is that just like *felled* seed drawn by gravitational force on indifferent land, ordaining sub-optimal outcomes, contextual situations and genetic proclivities conspire to consign all people to some sub-optimal coordinates we occupy in life, leaving us only a marginal quantity of seed *left to fall* on fertile ground. The continued use of the term “fell” on fertile ground, leading to a thirtyfold, sixtyfold, or even a hundredfold crop, gives a sense that the extent of germination in fertile ground *may* be a random attribute of the *leftover* seed to fall on good soil. *The random yield of thirty, sixty or one hundred crop epitomises the talents that are by chance*

¹ The parable uses the terms “made five talents more” and “made two talents more” and stays away from the term “double”, which, in my view, is a language of aggrandisement.

occurrence reposed to us, with which we are expected to productively engage and maximise their dividend. Some are fortuitously ordained with more talent than others, to which essentially, they have no claim, and the corollary that no one can be blamed for having less or boast for having more.

The Parable of the Sower is an acknowledgement of the indulgence for (whatever quantity of) seeds *fell(ed) on good soil, where it is ordained to produce a crop* (and manifest as our “talents”), for less than or no marginal effort from our part. Inevitably, some will have more talents, and some others will have different or fewer, but nevertheless, the love, education, good health and family support we may have received are not a result of having *deliberately* sown the seed of good strain quality or quantity in good soil. Notably, much of life’s bundle ineffectually gets dropped without retribution or cost!

Herein lies the sheet anchor of what Jesus thought of his own Christhood when He declares after his sojourn in the desert for six weeks in Luke 4:18: “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has *anointed* me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free”. The Hebrew term for “poor” and “oppressed” is the same. Conditions of poverty and of being shackled, feelings of oppression and states of health invariably have no causality. The Quaker view of the economics of social justice is inspired by Jesus’ Messianic purpose to redress life’s incongruities, especially those that preordain some to be poor, oppressed, shackled and sick. Several business propositions have thrived for decades from the Quaker principle that endowments are random, and every person is of equal worth. Such ideology, till today, remains the leitmotif of Quaker commerce. The principle that underlies the economics of these businesses is that, despite delinquencies (invariably for contextual reasons), God does not confer judgments on matters that conspire beyond one’s control. His grace is never far away—some seed, regardless of their strain quality or quantity, still fall on good soil to “produce (ordain) a crop—perhaps a HUNDRED times what was sown”. And that is the great mystery of God’s Amazing Grace -- “So the last will be first, and the first will be last” (Matthew 20:16).

Just a word of cautious celebration! While the Parable of the Sower is an instruction of God’s infinite mercy to unsuspecting wantonness, Galatians 6:7 is unequivocal: “God cannot be mocked - a man reaps what he sows”. The Parable of the Talents (Mathew 25, 14-30) makes it abundantly clear that wilful productivity will be rewarded, and wanton sloth will be punished and thrown where there shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth.

Interestingly, none of the servants appeared to envy the others for the different amounts of talent that they were given and did not ascribe the unequal productivity outcomes of the talents to the differences in their character or quality. Once again, our attention is drawn to John 14:2, which states that in the Lord's house there are many rooms, and it is up to us to cultivate our own garden around it.

Accounting Period

It is perhaps deliberate that the master does not disclose to his servants when he will return. He may have never wanted his servants to consider the long term when managing the talents he put in their care. They operated such that the master's return was imminent. The nearness of the date of the master's homecoming is epitomised by the servants who doubled the talents "went *at once* and traded with them". Even the servant who received the one talent went and dug in the ground and hid his master's money; there is a suggestion that this servant attempted to secure the talent on receipt *almost immediately*. Jesus consistently alluded in his teaching that judgment day is never going to be preannounced, and it is important, therefore, to be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour that you do not expect" (Luke 12:40). Economic thought also wrestles with making long-term plans that may transpire very differently than what is intended. The illustrious economist John Maynard Keynes, suspicious of long-term solutions, declared that in the long run we are all dead!?

The Conundrum

The main character in this parable is the absentee master who expects profits from his capital. This master's perversity is made apparent when he acknowledges that he is harsh and takes things that do not belong to him. On his return, he appears to demand profit from the talents given to his three slaves. The two who have made enormous gains find themselves rewarded with governing authority in a blissful kingdom. One that returns only what was given is chided for not becoming a usurer to make at least some profit from interest. The whole emphasis is on the return of more money. The talent is taken from the third slave and given to the first, and we get a reprise of the apophthegm, seen earlier in the gospel, "For to everyone who has will more be given, and he will have an abundance. But from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away." It is spoken expressly in relation to money, and the master comes out looking like a classic robber baron. This certainly looks like bad news for the poor and seems to completely counter

many of the teachings of Jesus. How can the same Jesus who warned people against striving for earthly wealth now tell a parable with a protagonist who is completely obsessed with wealth and power, even to the detriment of his own workers? Intriguing as it may appear, this conundrum has encouraged some Western commentators to suggest that Jesus is exemplifying the profit motive of free enterprise. Rohrbaugh (1993), however, negates this view when he suggests that peasants — who made up more than ninety per cent of the populace — would have had a drastically different understanding of these words. They lived in a world characterized by the concept of limited good, a world in which all goods were limited and had already been apportioned. To make a gain necessarily meant taking from someone else. He draws on ancient thinkers, including Aristotle, Jerome, and Plutarch, to bring home the point that profit-making was generally considered evil and immoral in the ancient world. Thus, while the standard interpretation may have seemed like good news to the rich, or to modern Western interpreters, to ancient peasants it could have only been received as a “text of terror.” On this account, Rohrbaugh (1993) questions whether the parable originated with Jesus at all, or whether it was developed later to protect the position of wealthy persons in Christian communities.

Building on Rohrbaugh’s (1993) work, Herzog (1994) paints a vivid picture of the social and economic realities of masters, retainers, and peasants like the ones described in this parable. According to him, wealthy landowners depended upon intermediaries, like the three (or ten) slaves of this parable, to squeeze wealth out of the peasants and dispossess them of their land while at the same time deflecting displeasure with these actions away from the master, who had the most to gain. In the process, these retainers stood to gain a great amount as well. Peasant hearers of this parable would have understood the actions of the master and the first two slaves identified it easily as the sort of exploitation they had grown accustomed to. The actions of the third servant, on the other hand, would have seemed very strange. Nevertheless, he is the hero of the story. By taking the master’s money out of circulation, he ensures that it will not be used to exploit others. Furthermore, he blows the whistle on the deceitful practices of the master, and for this, he must be silenced. The master effectively does this in his judgment of the third servant.

As Kitchen (2004) shows, the traditional interpretation of this parable is simply not consistent with the character of Jesus that we get from the rest of the gospel. And as Rohrbaugh (1993) observes, it is all too easy for us to slip into an interpretation that Jesus openly preaches the capitalist pursuit of wealth, an interpretation that has been explicitly suggested by at least one scholar. On the other hand, Jesus likely intends to exemplify his instruction

to his disciples in the Parable of the Talents by what he told them (in Matthew 9:35 -38) “Therefore said he unto them, The harvest truly is great, but the labourers are few: pray ye therefore the Lord of the harvest, that he would send forth labourers into his harvest”. Jesus knew full well that few were prepared to engage with the harvest in the eschatological sense. All three of the master’s servants had an opportunity to work the *harvest* (sent by the Lord of the harvest), and one of them took a conservative view. In the context that workers, engaging in the harvest, were in short supply, it was indeed important that they be given appropriate resources to deliver expected outcomes. If done well, their *behaviour* would merit handsome *reward* (normal in demand-supply transactions), which the master did to his two servants who had doubled their talents, while punishing the behaviour of one servant who had incurred an *opportunity* cost of forgoing options of increasing his talent. It appears from Jesus’ teaching that he considered the outcomes of the appointed task (engaging with the harvest) as very important as is seen when he repeatedly (three times) instructs his most favoured disciple Simon Peter (anointed by Jesus with the appellation as ‘Peter’ meaning ‘Rock’ who would build Jesus’ church) in John 21:15 -17 to, “Feed my sheep”. Jesus’ responses to Peter were a sequel to Peter affirming his love three times for Jesus. The third time Jesus said to Peter, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, “Do you love me?” He said, “Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you.” Jesus said, “Feed my sheep”. It seems that Jesus believed that the master reposed confidence in those who loved him by resourcing them with the appropriate number and character of talents. The master consequently did not expect his servants to renege on “Feed my sheep” as it were in a field where the harvest was plentiful. Happily, the master did not perceive an environment of dwindling supplies or shortage of arable land, fresh water, energy and minerals - essential for the production of food, but rather a plentiful harvest. Anything that suggested that those who professed love for him would NOT go the distance of engaging with the harvest to feed his sheep would only therefore incur the wrath of the master.

Economic Implications

It cannot be ignored that the parable, as presented, nevertheless engages with several economic concepts at various stages of the parable’s narrative. The approach to taking risks in managing assets in a conceivable *market economy* is central to the moral of the story, with the intention of growing the portfolio. Because the nature of the storyline is a parable (and therefore

pithy), major inferences from the imperfect information presented cannot help but be conjectural. Also, it is possible that some of the representations of elements of the parable might not be in sync with its intended meaning to the audience of the Roman era, as pointed out by Rohrbaugh (1993).

Nonetheless, Jesus' teaching about the talents is a parable and not an allegory; the single standout message is that *profit* arising from *productivity* is to be *rewarded*, while *opportunity costs* arising from lack of enterprise will inevitably be *punished*. The emotion of *fear* (*the risk of losing*) as a driving motivation for *investment in enterprise* is palpable. *Recognition of ability, equitable allocation of resources, expectation and performance appraisal* of the stewardship of the assets by the *owner of the capital* are also key factors in the parable's instruction. It may not be an unrealistic reason to expect that these universal and time-invariant economic axioms addressed in the Parable of the Talents will spur continued effort in prospecting the promise of Scripture for deriving economic wisdom. In a world obsessed with material possessions, some success in a Scripture-based approach to the management of resources and creation of value to "feed more sheep" (including those from where the master reaps where he has not sown and gathers where he scattered no seed) might have a redeeming effect on the economic ills that riddle society.

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