
Economics as Relationships

**An article from the *Cathedral Times*
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Christians in the developed world usually forget that so many of the parables of Jesus deal with money. The usual suspects for our parish theological discussions are topics like church structure, or sex, or the general matters of biblical authority. We tend to consider what Jesus said about money only during stewardship or fund-raising times.

However, during these last two months of global financial anxiety, suddenly the way Jesus talks about money has some striking application. "You cannot serve God and Mammon" has become self-evident. The parable of the "unjust steward" who "made friends for himself with unrighteous mammon" also makes a lot of sense when assets in our own time have been de-valued (Luke 16:1-13).

It is the parable of the talents that I am fascinated with today. Again, during usual economic times, Christians tend to interpret that parable figuratively, so that "talents" are our God-given gifts and abilities. The lesson is that we are to use those for greater glory and the kingdom of heaven.

But what if the parable of the talents is really about literal finance and economics, after all? I think it is. We all remember the story. A wealthy master went on a long journey and left one asset manager with five talents, another asset manager with two talents, and a third asset manager with one talent. When he returned, the manager with five talents had traded and made five more. The manager with two talents had traded and made two more. The timid and fearful third manager, with one talent, said, "I knew you to be a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow; so I was afraid and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here, you have what is yours." (Matthew 25:14-30).

Today, maybe the first thing to admit is that if this scenario had been played out in the last six months of the United States, the manager who hid his talent in the ground would probably be the only one ahead right now!

But the power of this Jesus story is that the managers traded; they engaged others. They risked relationship and trust. According to my meager financial expertise, one of the primary problems in our time is that banks and businesses are too scared to offer loans, not confident enough to trade. With no credit and no trust, economic transaction is paralyzed.

This parable of Jesus is about overcoming fear and taking the risk to grow and to invest. Jesus is talking about the kingdom of heaven, but he is also talking about building up the economy in general! In fact, the word for "economy" in the Greek Bible means the management of a household; it means "stewardship!" Our economy should be the way we manage our cultural and political and financial household.

The key word in Jesus' parable is "trade." The asset managers had the courage to go out and trade with what had been entrusted to them. They took risks. They engaged in relationships. Good business, and good economy, is always about good relationships, not about money, or the "mammon god." Good economy is always about trusting relationships. In Jesus' parable, the asset manager who loses out is the one who was afraid, so afraid that he was unable to take the risk of economic relationship.

In the uncertain situation of our present time, Jesus' parable reminds us to engage in relationships - not just our domestic

or familial or friendly relationships-but our business and financial relationships, too. Maybe especially our financial relationships! This is not the time to hide our talent in the ground. This is the time to use whatever we have, no matter how great or small, to build up trusting and trading relationships. Jesus said this would be like the kingdom of heaven.

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