First Presbyterian Church of Waynesboro, Virginia

The Columns *Online*

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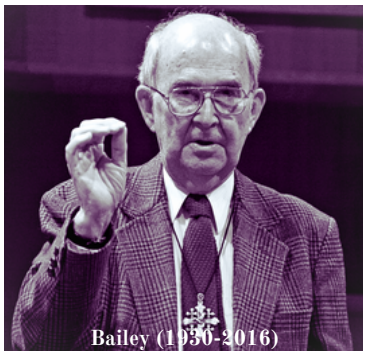
Capitalism and the Parable of the Talents (Luke 19:11-27)

KENNETH BAILEY.NET

A PORTAL FOR MIDDLE EASTERN NEW TESTAMENT STUDIES



Bailey (1930-2016)

Serious Christian education requires that we not simply teach the Bible but that our understanding of the text always be open to refinement. For 40 years I taught my Middle Eastern students, "Keep your exegetical conclusions tentatively final." They have to be final in the sense that, as a disciple of Jesus Christ, I must live out my discipleship today. Obedience to my Lord cannot wait for me to read one more technical article in New Testament studies. At the same time, my exegesis is always flawed. Thus my/our interpretation of Scripture must never be closed to refinement and revision. One of the Biblical stories that needs a fresh look is the Parable of the Talents. Lesslie Newbigin talks about the "plausibility structures" through which all of us see the world. What he means is that each of us looks at the world through the lenses of our language, culture, history, politics, economic theories, religion, and military adventures. As Westerners, one of our lenses is capitalism . In this short article I will try to liberate the Parable of the Talents from the presuppositions of capitalism that have perhaps unconsciously influenced our translations and interpretations of this text for a long time.

Herod the Great made a trip to Rome in 40 BC seeking a Roman appointment as king, and his son, Archelaus, made a similar journey in 4 BC to argue his case against his half-brother Antipas. Thus, Jesus uses a political scene familiar to his audience as background for this parable. The key phrase appears in the initial speech the nobleman gives to the servants he leaves behind as he journeys "into a far country to receive for himself kingship and return." Obviously, this nobleman is confident that he will receive the kingship he seeks. Not everyone did! His initial speech to his servants requires scrutiny.

continued

Parable, continued

The nobleman calls in ten servants and gives each of them a pound (the equivalent to 100 days' wages for a working man). As he does so he says, "Engage in trade *en ho* I am coming back." The little Greek expression *en ho* can legitimately be translated three ways: "until," "in which," or "because." Traditionally, we have read the text to mean, "Engage in trade until I return." The other options are: "Engage in trade (in a situation) in which I am coming back." Or, "Engage in trade because I am coming back." The first of these options reads *en ho* as a time reference (until). The second is a literal translation (in which); while the third sees the phrase as a causative (because). What slant have we traditionally given the parable by selecting the first alternative?

With the reading, "Engage in trade until I return" the whole point of the master's command becomes: *Get out there and hustle. You have a limited time to 'do your thing.' On my return I expect profits! See how much money you can generate! Make hay while the sun shines!*

However, when the servants do return, the master commends the first servant for being faithful not successful. What is the master really seeking?

If the second translation option is adopted, the text will read, "Engage in trade in a situation in which I am coming back." This literal (legitimate) reading produces a significantly different understanding of the entire story. (If the third option is selected the result is the same.) Imagine a scene where the Shah of Iran, in his last days in power, calls ten of his servants and tells them: *I am going to take a little vacation. I have $5,000 for each of you. I want you to open shops in downtown Teheran. The sign on the shop will (of course) read, "His Majesty's Royal Rug (or whatever) Shop." Keep in mind that I am coming back! I know I have enemies. They will most likely follow me and try to destroy me. But never fear. I will prevail and return. In the interim I expect you to publicly and uncompromisingly declare yourselves (in this hostile, uncertain environment) to be my loyal servants.*

What will those servants do once they receive the money and the Shah leaves the country? If they are good Middle Easterners and understand the total instability of the political milieu in which they live, they will bury the money and wait to see who wins, the Shah or his enemies. If they take the risk and start a business in the Shah's name, the shop will likely be open 15 minutes a week late each Saturday afternoon after most shoppers have gone home.

Such is the real world of this parable. The nobleman wants to know, "Which of you are willing to take the risk and openly declare yourselves to be my loyal servants in a world that opposes me and my rule?" In the story, the nobleman does indeed receive kingly power and return. On arriving home, he calls in the ten servants in order that he might know ... what?

The Greek text contains a key word which, in the entire New Testament, appears only here. The word is: *diapramateuomai*. It can mean "How much has been gained by trading." But it can also be translated, "How much business has been transacted." From the second century onwards the Syriac and Coptic versions of this text have consistently chosen the second meaning. Most of the Arabic versions have done the same. The difference is critical.

If the master wants to check the books to see "What has been gained by trading?" then he is trying to find out how much money they have made. But if he is asking, "How much business have you transacted?" then obviously he seeking to discover the extent to which they have openly and publicly declared their loyalty to him during his absence. This latter meaning reinforces our suggestion for understanding the original charge. Before the master departs, he challenges his servants to represent him publicly during the uncertain time of his absence.

On his return he wishes to check the extent of their willingness to risk public exposure as his servants. Examining the account books will, at a glance, give him that information. A full ledger will tell him that the entire community knew the servant in question was his master's man. An empty account book will witness to the servant's fear of showing public loyalty to him. Has our capitalism influenced the way we have translated and understood this parable? Is the question discussed in the story one of profits, or faithfulness in a hostile environment?

As noted, the first servant is commended for his faithfulness. The last was afraid. Of what? He claims to have been afraid of his master. But was he more likely afraid lest the master not return and he have no choice but to deal with his master's enemies? When caught flat-footed how does he try to defend himself?

It is impossible to imagine when the servant fails his master's test of faithfulness that he then deliberately insults him. The intention of his speech must be to compliment his master. How so? He says (in effect), "I see you as a thief." How can this be a compliment?

continued

Parable, continued

If the master is a bedouin raider chieftain, such a speech is indeed a compliment. But if he is a nobleman in a settled agricultural community, it's an insult. Clearly, the unfaithful servant has critically misjudged his master. The faithful servant had no difficulty understanding his master's true nature. Rather, it was the unfaithful slave who completely misunderstood the big man, and in trying to compliment him actually insulted him. What is the master's response?

The master observes, "You knew me (i.e. you experienced me) as a hard man ..." He is not admitting that he is a hard man but instead is saying, "I understand that you experienced me as a hard man." The judgement he then passes on this unfaithful servant is that this servant is to be left with his misunderstanding of the master; a misunderstanding produced by the servant's unfaithfulness. The servant looks at the master through blue sunglasses. His unfaithfulness placed the blue glasses on his face. Looking through these glasses, the master (to him), appears blue. The master says, "My judgement against you is this: I will leave the blue sunglasses on your face. I will leave you with your self-created, distorted perceptions of my nature."

What then does this parable say about faithfulness and unfaithfulness in our troubled society? What distortions of our Master's true nature has unfaithfulness created in our culture?

A British journalist once asked Mother Teresa how she kept going, knowing that she could never meet the needs of all the dying in the streets of Calcutta. She replied, "I am not called to be successful; I'm called to be faithful." (Very bad capitalism! Don't invest in her company!)

Dr. Kenneth E. Bailey
The Presbyterian Outlook, 2001

HOLY WEEK 2023

4/02

PALM SUNDAY

4/06

MAUNDY THURSDAY

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN
SIMPLE MEAL & COMMUNION
NOON

SECOND PRESBYTERIAN
4:00 P.M.

WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN
DINNER & WORSHIP
6:00 P.M.

4/07

GOOD FRIDAY

WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN
PRAYER IN THE CHAPEL
9:00 A.M. - 3:00 P.M.

FINLEY MEMORIAL
7:00 P.M.

4/09

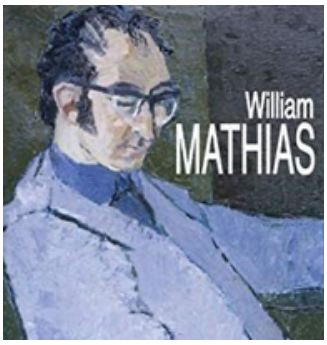
EASTER

HERMITAGE PRESBYTERIAN
SUNRISE
7:00 A.M.

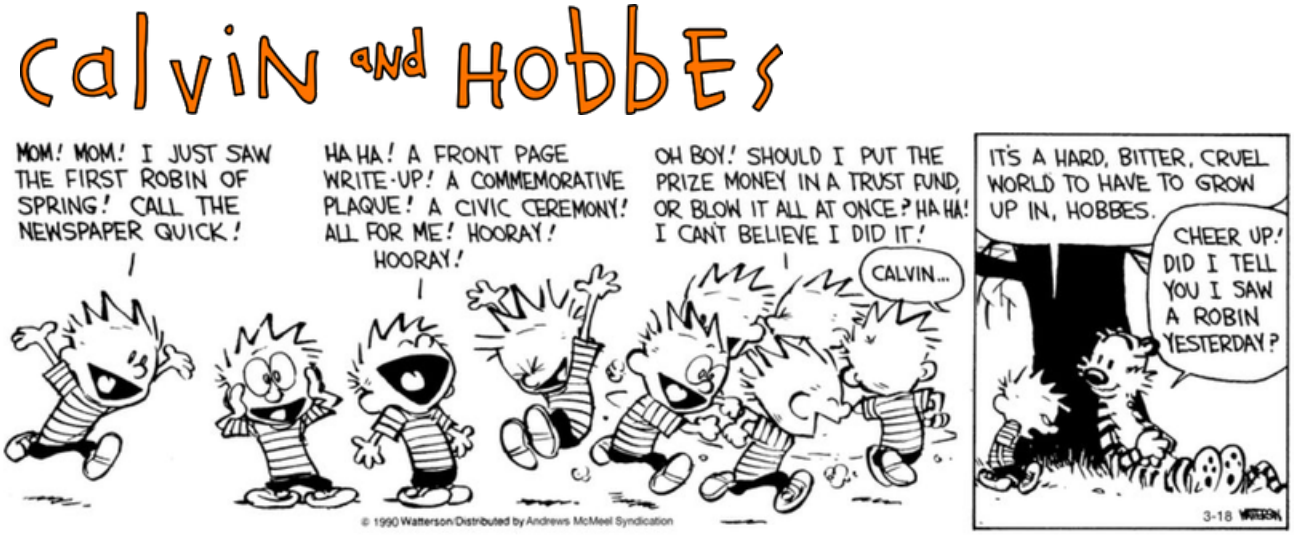
WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN
POT LUCK BREAKFAST
8:30 -10:30 A.M.

Music Notes for Palm Sunday

This week, we celebrate Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem, his pathway strewn with palms. The opening and closing hymns will be some of the most familiar for this holy day: *Hosanna, Loud Hosanna* (ELLACOMBE) and *Ride On! Ride On in Majesty!* (ST. DROSTANE.



The introit and anthem also reflect that joyous day. The introit, *Hosanna* is part of the *Missa Brevis* by the Welsh composer William Mathias (1934-1994), composed in 1973 for the 80th Patronal Festival of St. Matthew's Northampton, England. The anthem, also called *Hosanna,* was written by Christian Gregor (1723-1801). It is one of over 300 hymns penned by the Moravian composer and bishop, known as the "Father of Moravian Music."



Our Worship Channels

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First Presbyterian Church of Waynesboro, Virginia

YouTube

This Week in History - the 70s & 80s.

The Camp David Accords are signed, ending 30 years of warfare between Israel and Egypt. Prime Minster Menachem Begin of Israel and Egyptian President Anwar Sadat agree to the treaty of mutual recognition and peace, after talks mediated by President Jimmy Carter.

March 26, 1979

The failure of a cooling valve causes a reactor core to overheat at the Three Mile Island nuclear power plant near Harrisburg, PA. A pressure relief valve then stuck, causing the coolant level in the reactor to plummet, threatening a catastrophic nuclear meltdown. The accident resulted in the release of radioactive steam into the atmosphere, and created a storm of controversy over the necessity and safety of nuclear power plants.

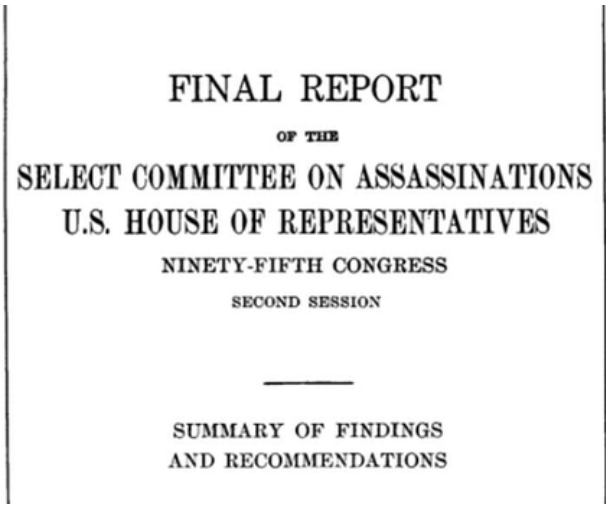
March 28, 1979

President Ronald Reagan is shot while walking toward his limousine in Washington, D.C., following a speech. Three others were also hit, including Reagan's Press Secretary, James Brady, who was shot in the forehead but survived. The president soon recovered from the surgery and returned to his duties.

March 30, 1981

A KLM 747 initiates takeoff at Los Rodeos Airport on the island of Tenerife, while a Pan Am 747 is still on the runway. The resulting collision and fire killed everyone on board KLM 4805 and most of the occupants of Pan Am 1736. With 583 fatalities and only 61 survivors, it remains the deadliest accident in the history of civil aviation history.

March 27, 1977



FINAL REPORT

OF THE

SELECT COMMITTEE ON ASSASSINATIONS
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

NINETY-FIFTH CONGRESS

SECOND SESSION

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS
AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The House Select Committee on Assassinations releases its final report regarding the killings of John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King, and Robert Kennedy.

March 29, 1979

American track and field athlete James Cleveland "Jesse" Owens dies at the age of 66. A renowned track and field star at Ohio State, Owens won four gold medals at the 1936 Olympic Games. A pack-a-day cigarette smoker from the age 32, he succumbed to an extremely aggressive and drug-resistant type of lung cancer.

April 1, 1980