

Tony Perkins tells us what parables mean

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

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I've been meaning to get to this one for days: A lot of people didn't like [Tony Perkins' CNN Belief Blog post last week](#), and rightly so. Jesus was a free marketer, long before the concept was developed? Sure, if you say so:

The primary purpose of the parable [of the talents], which appears in the Gospel of Luke, was to make clear to his disciples that the kingdom of God would not be physically established on the earth for some time and that, until then, they were being entrusted with certain responsibilities.

Jesus, depicted as a ruler in the story, would have to leave for a while as he traveled to a faraway place to receive authority to reign over the kingdom. In his absence, the disciples - depicted as servants - were to "occupy" until he returned.

Here's the direct quote from Luke: "He called his ten servants, and gave to them ten minas, one mina each (a mina today would be worth around \$225), and he then told them to 'Occupy till I come.' " (Luke 19:13, King James Version)

But just what does Jesus' order to occupy mean? Does it mean take over and trash public property, as the Occupy movement has? Does it mean engage in antisocial behavior while denouncing a political and economic system that grants one the right and luxury to choose to be unproductive?

No, the Greek term behind the old English translation literally means "be occupied with business." As with all parables, Jesus uses a common activity such as fishing or farming to provide a word picture with a deeper spiritual meaning.

From a spiritual perspective, the mina in this parable represents the opportunity of life; each of us is given the same opportunity to build our lives, and each of us shares the same responsibility to invest our lives for the purpose of bringing a return and leaving a legacy. Jesus gave equal responsibility and opportunity to

each of his 10 servants.

The fact that Jesus chose the free market system as the basis for this parable should not be overlooked.

One effective response is CCblogger James McCarty's: [Okay, but what about the rest of Luke's gospel?](#) (See also McCarty's follow-up post, which we [featured at CCblogs.](#)) But what irked me most about this was Perkins's treatment of the parable itself. "The primary purpose of the parable?" Says who? For every Good Samaritan and Prodigal Son the gospels offer us, there are several other parables that are mostly cryptic and difficult. I'd say this falls into the latter category, Sunday school interpretations about using our athletic/musical/culinary skills for Jesus notwithstanding. James Howell [refers to](#) "talents" in Matthew's version of the parable as "a most unfortunate translation" (subscription required)--"use your talents for the kingdom" is a bit too easy here.

But Perkins sticks with Luke's version, in which we're dealing with "minas" instead of "talents." Presumably he does this for the King James phrase "occupy till I come," which he argues means occupy yourself with *business*, not with wrecking public parks *even though you already have the luxury of being unemployed*.

Also exclusive to Luke's version: the master is a political leader of some kind, traveling abroad to expand his power; his subjects hate him and try to escape his authority; on his return, he orders them slaughtered in his presence. "Jesus," says Perkins, is "depicted as a ruler in this story." Really? If the ruler represents Jesus, it's maybe the worst he comes off in all four gospels. But parables aren't allegories. This stuff's hard enough to interpret without trying to make each character correspond to a specific person or concept.

I find a lot to like in William Herzog's [liberationist reading](#): the ruler is the villain; the third servant's refusal to participate in an oppressive economy makes him the hero. I'm pretty sure Perkins wouldn't follow me there, but it'd be nice if he at least acknowledged that this parable is hard stuff, not a simple lesson about the importance of seizing opportunity.

Another possible reason Perkins goes with Luke instead of Matthew: the ruler "gave equal responsibility and opportunity to each of his 10 servants." In Matthew, of course, the three each start with *different* amounts--but that wouldn't fit into the conservative belief that *laissez-faire* is the same thing as equal opportunity. At any

rate, in both versions it's the one who ends up with more who's rewarded, the one with less who's punished. Both Luke and Matthew put a proverb to that effect in the master/ruler's mouth.

But [as Billie Holiday understood](#), just because the words are in the Bible doesn't mean the Bible presents them as good news. And as occupiers and protesters everywhere understand, just because a status quo exists doesn't mean it's good, just or unchangeable.