

God's Investment and Ours

Towards a Theology of Investment - Part Two

As regular readers of this journal will know, Faith in Business has chosen 'investment' as its key theme for 2022. Financial investment is an important part of this. But we are also keen to consider other forms of investment. In the first instalment of this four-part series of articles, Peter Heslam introduced the idea of investment. He noted ways in which the Bible depicts God as an investor. And he highlighted the apparent 'recklessness' of some of the key biblical models of investment. Here he focuses on the portion of scripture that is most directly to do with investment: the Parable of the Talents. He suggests that, even if the parable is taken to be mainly about money, it is thereby also about virtue.

What do Dragon's Den and The Apprentice have in common? That's right - they are both very popular TV shows. But they are both also about investment. They are about people with ideas and energy but limited resources seeking investment from people with ideas, energy and a surplus of resources. The entrepreneur candidates hope the entrepreneur investors will catch their vision, and trust them sufficiently, to pour some of their spare resources into the early-stage businesses of the candidates.

Investment is good, then, for producing riveting TV shows and benefiting a few individuals who survive the dragons' fire or the threat of Lord Alan Sugar's 'you're fired!'. But what other things can investment help deliver? Through the capacity it gives for business to flourish and grow, here are just a few:

- Tackling climate change with green technology;
- Tackling disease and pandemics with vaccines;
- Tackling poverty through enterprise;
- Ensuring communities, workplaces, organisations, cultures and families can thrive;
- Securing the supply of food, clothing, shelter, and culture;
- Generating revenue that creates jobs, and tax returns for public benefit.

These are basic things all societies need. That is why everyone concerned about people and the planet should think seriously and positively about business investment.

But we need to do that thinking from a biblical perspective, for Jesus' Parable of the Talents (Mt 25.14-30 and Lk 19.12-27) and the Bible's creation narratives (discussed in Part One of this series) portray God as the ultimate investor. And because God is in the business of changing lives, we also need to consider the practical implications of that perspective.

These are ambitious objectives! None of us can accomplish them alone. That is why Faith in Business has been bringing theologians, finance professionals and entrepreneurs together to discuss theoretical and practical ways to maximise the positive potential of investment. At our annual retreat in May 2022, in this quarterly journal, and in our monthly webinars, we have been considering how investment can help facilitate human flourishing and the values of the kingdom of God. This has all been undergirded by prayer, worship, reflection on scripture, and an orientation towards practical action.

The Parable of the Talents provides an important stimulus to these

deliberations. The servants have all received from their master sizeable amounts of investment capital (one talent was worth about twenty years of a day-labourer's wage). Their task is to put these sums of money to work. 'Do business with these until I come back', the master tells them (Lk 19.13). Two of the servants do exactly that and are able to present the master when he comes home with far more money than he had entrusted to them. These two intrepid 'multipliers' achieved, in fact, a return on investment (ROI) of between 50 to 100 percent.

Not so with the third servant. Out of fear for his master, he buried the deposit in the ground, which meant he could only return the same amount as he had received - an ROI of zero percent! Whilst the first two servants receive the master's commendation, and are rewarded with greater responsibilities and benefits, the third servant receives the master's condemnation for being 'wicked and lazy'. If he had only deposited the money in a bank, the master railed, he could have received it back with interest. As it is, the deposit entrusted to the third servant is given to the first servant, while the third servant is cast into 'the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth' (Mt 25.30).

The Apprentice

Photo: BBC/PA



According to first century rabbinic law, the best security against treasure being stolen was to bury it. Should treasure be stolen from you that had been entrusted to your care, you would be considered free from liability had you buried it as soon as you had received it. For the master in this parable, however, the third servant was liable for two reasons. First, he had been charged to 'put this money to work' (Lk 19.13). Second, even if all the third servant had wanted to do was to keep the money safe, he could have deposited it in a bank. Without doing so, the money he returned represented a loss – a loss of the interest that would have accrued. The master was clearly of the understanding, familiar in market economies today, that time is money.

Parables teach eternal and spiritual truths that cannot be reduced to practical lessons on the economics of investment and entrepreneurship. It is perfectly legitimate, therefore, to regard the talents in the parable to refer to non-monetary talents, including


spiritual and artistic gifts, gifts of time, and gifts of character and personality.

But even if the story is taken to be primarily about money, it is also about virtues, such as hard work, trust, creativity, patience and hope. These are all involved when money is soundly invested in enterprise, as it was when the first two servants put it to work (Mt 25.16–17; Lk 19.13). The third servant is unable to demonstrate such virtue because his negative and untrusting attitude towards his master makes him fearful of the future. His laziness is rooted in a timid and foreboding mindset that makes him unwilling to think creatively and to take risks.

Virtue, then, is foundational to the generation of wealth. The zero-sum economics of exploitation, theft and corruption can bring temporary material rewards, as they allow people to gain at the expense of others. These immoral means of gaining wealth have been pervasive in human history. But sustained and widespread prosperity

comes only as a result of work performed in harmony with a moral universe.

This is how the first two servants made money; there is no suggestion in the story that their increase in wealth was associated with an increase in the poverty of others. Multiplication does not rely on subtraction.

In the world of contemporary finance, there is increasing talk of 'ethical investment'. That is often taken to mean an avoidance of companies that deal in certain 'negatives', like tobacco, arms, gambling, or pornography. That is fine, as far as it goes. But the Parable of the Talents provides a spur to think positively about how we can invest ethically: how can what I have been blessed with reap even greater blessing over time? Those who address this question, and act accordingly, may not make it onto popular TV shows, but they can expect to hear those blissful words spoken by the master to the first two stewards, 'well done, good and faithful servant...come and share your master's happiness!' (Mt 25.21,23). 



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