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(IJCRS) **Matt 25:14-30: A Critical Look at the 'Third Servant Syndrome' in  
the Light of Theological Studies in Nigeria**



## **Matt 25:14-30: A Critical Look at the ‘Third Servant Syndrome’ in the Light of Theological Studies in Nigeria**

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### **Abstract**

During his earthly ministry, Jesus used parables to convey his message to his listeners, one of which is found in Matt 25:14-30. This parable not only draws the reader's attention to the surprise of the master's sudden return, but it also emphasizes the servants' behavior during the time the master has been away, and it is here that we find the ‘third servant syndrome’. It refers to the tendency to keep one's meager talents hidden rather than exploring the risky possibilities of adding value to them and this is the aim of this article. It finds out that this tendency is common in Nigerian theological circles, where it is often seen as a theologian's goal to faithfully pass on what one has received to others. However, in the Parable of the Talents, Jesus demonstrates that commitment to faithfulness, defined as passing on the tradition exactly as received, is equivalent to unfaithfulness because the Master expects the recipient to invest the talent and pass it on with interest at the end of one's tenure. Using the rhetorical and contextual methods of exegesis, this article examines the causes of the third servant syndrome in Nigerian theological circles and advocates for the replacement of an unproductive servile understanding of faithfulness with a first or second servant understanding of faithfulness that recognizes that in order to be truly faithful to the tradition, the theologian must work to add value to it in order to pass on more than what one has received. As a contribution to knowledge, many have written on this text, but known has taken time to read the text from the perspective of the third servant syndrome. Hence, it will add to already existing literature on the subject matter and open more windows for future research.

**Keywords:** *Third Servant Syndrome, Theological Studies*

## I. Introduction

A year after obtaining his doctorate, the researcher was invited to deliver the keynote address at a meeting of theologians in Abuja. Throughout the exercise, he urged them to conduct more research and publish more of their theological findings. At the end of his speech, one of the audience members asked him an intriguing question. “What else are we supposed to write?” he wondered, “isn’t everything already written?” He used the doctrine of the Blessed Trinity to illustrate his point. What else could a Nigerian theologian add to the Blessed Trinity doctrine? Every detail of the doctrine appears to have already been written up by classical Christian theologians such as, St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas. Everything anyone wants to know about the Trinity can be found in official Church documents such as conciliar documents and catechisms. What could a young Nigerian theologian write to add to or influence the seemingly settled controversies surrounding the doctrine of the Trinity?

The inquiring scholar raised an issue that many theologians, particularly Nigerian theologians, face. Is the role of theologians solely to defend and propagate the faith, or do they also re-examine and reformulate the meaning of faith for the communities and generations they represent? The scholar who posed the question undoubtedly aspired to be the ideal theologian. He was a Catholic theologian who desired to adhere to the Catholic theological tradition. His question, on the other hand, revealed that he was struggling with a particular interpretation of faithfulness. Is it faithful to maintain theological status quo? Or does faithfulness imply renewing and adding value to a received tradition? It is risky to renew and add value. In the process, one may unintentionally diminish the tradition.

This is a conundrum for theologians, particularly in Nigeria, where the emphasis in theological formation is frequently on consuming from rather than producing for theological markets. It presents the inexperienced theologian with a fundamental choice: to spend one's life as a theologian either maintaining theological status quo without risk of failure, but without bearing any new fruit, or seeking to add value to the received theological tradition with the risk of diminishing the tradition and failing in the process.

The preceding led to the selection of the parable of the talents in Matt 25:14-30 as an example of the described attitude of theologians in Nigeria. The parable not only draws the reader's attention to the surprise of the master's unexpected return, but it also emphasizes the servants' behavior while the master was away,<sup>1</sup> and it is here that the ‘third servant syndrome’ is found. It refers to the tendency to keep one's meager talents hidden rather than risking adding value to them. This is

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<sup>1</sup> Hagner, Donald A. (1993) *Word Biblical Commentary: Matthew 1-13*. Vol. 33A. Dallas, Texas: Word Books Publisher, 733.

a common tendency in Nigerian theological circles, where it is often seen as a theologian's goal to faithfully pass on what has been received to others.

This article examines Matt 25:14-30 and the causes of the third servant syndrome in Nigerian theological circles using rhetorical and contextual exegesis; and advocates for the replacement of an unproductive servile understanding of faithfulness with a first or second servant understanding of faithfulness that recognizes that in order to be truly faithful to the tradition, the theologian must work to add value to it in order to pass on more than what one has received.

## 2. Matt 25:14-30 and its Synoptic Parallels

This parable is paralleled by the parable of Minas in Luke 19:12-27. Despite the fact that Luke's wording differs from Matthew's (vv. 12, 14, 15a, 25, 27), and there is no verbatim agreement in some similar expressions, servants in both Matthew and Luke have given money with the same basic theme of trading with their master's money (Davies and Allison 403). However, the origin of both parables is highly debatable. Both parables are not Q texts in terms of source; because neither Matthew nor Luke mentions the parable in the context of Q material.<sup>2</sup> As a result, determining the source of these parables is subject to conjecture. In this regard, Donald A. Hagner contends that, unless Jesus spoke two similar parables, both passages stem from the same parable, with differences occurring early in the transmission process.<sup>3</sup> Luz, on the other hand, contends that the parable in Matthew is derived from special material, whereas the parable in Luke is an independently transmitted variant. According to him, the similarities between the two parables demonstrate that the story's wording is already relatively stable in the oral tradition.<sup>4</sup> This article supports the previous position because the similarities of the parables are far more convincing than the differences, implying that they may have originated from the same source.

The dialogue scenes in Matt 25:24-28 and Luke 19:20-26 agree with wording, though there are differences within the agreements that cannot be explained as redaction.<sup>5</sup> This article discovered a direct parallelism between Matt 25:29 and Luke 19:26, which states, "For the one having many will be given and will have abundance, but of him who does not have and one he has will be taken away." Despite some differences, there are parallels that are strikingly similar between Matthew and Luke. Hagner notices the parallels: the journey of a man (but in Luke a "noble") to acquire a kingdom (but in Luke "to acquire a kingdom"); the gathering of his servants (but in Luke "ten," though only three report); (Luke 19:11-21).<sup>6</sup> Similarly, in Matthew, the servants are entrusted with "talents," which are large sums of money, whereas in Luke, they are entrusted with minas

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<sup>2</sup> Luz, Ulrich (2005) Matthew 21-28. Minnesota: Fortress Press, 21.

<sup>3</sup> Hagner, 733.

<sup>4</sup> Luz, 248.

<sup>5</sup> Luz, 248.

<sup>6</sup> Hagner, 733.

(pounds), which are quite small sums.<sup>7</sup> The amounts differ from servant to servant in Matthew, but they all received the same amount in Luke. Regarding the amount variation, Morris claims that the story in Luke teaches that all of God's servants have one basic task, that of living out our faith; the parable in Matthew begins with the fact that different gifts can be found in God's servants and then shows how they use (or do not use) those gifts.<sup>8</sup>

### 3. The Text of Matt 25:14-30

#### 3.1 Textual Critical Issues

There are several alternate readings in verses 14-30, the most important of which is found in the transition from verses 15-16. The last term in v. 15 is the adverb *eutheōs* (immediately), which is surrounded by the preceding verb *apedēmēsen* and the following verb *poreutheis*; thus, the adverb can be connected to either the preceding or the following verb. This implies that either the master immediately left for his journey after giving the talents to his servants, or that the first servant immediately acted with the talents given to him.

Majority of the witnesses use the conjunction, *de* as follows: *eutheōs poreutheis de* (2 $\aleph$ , A, C, D, K, L, W and Majority text), implying that *eutheōs* is linked to the preceding *apedēmēsen*. However, a few Greek witnesses, supported by the early versions it and as, place the conjunction before *poreutheis*, implying that the temporal adverb goes with the following text.

The witnesses with no inserted conjunction *de* are most likely to have the same understanding ( $\aleph$  \*B, further supported by the Old Latin b and g<sup>1</sup>). Thus, the prominent Codices *Sinaiticus* and *Vaticanus*, with this reading, provide strong evidence that Jesus is saying that the first servant immediately set to work. As a result, there's no point in the master leaving right away; there's a lot of point in the servant getting to work. This is supported by the use of *eutheōs* elsewhere in Matthew (Matt. 4:20, 22; 20:34). As a result, the presentation in the Greek NT text is the traditional verse division and Father's association of "immediately" with the master's journey.

#### 3.2 Translation of Matt 25:14-30 (NRSV)

<sup>14</sup>For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; <sup>15</sup>to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. <sup>16</sup>The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. <sup>17</sup>In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. <sup>18</sup>But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money. <sup>19</sup>After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. <sup>20</sup>Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five

<sup>7</sup> Morris, Leon (1992) *The Gospel According to Matthew*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 626.

<sup>8</sup> Morris, 626.

more talents, saying, ‘Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents.’ <sup>21</sup>His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.’ <sup>22</sup>And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, ‘Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents.’ <sup>23</sup>His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.’ <sup>24</sup>Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, ‘Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; <sup>25</sup>so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.’ <sup>26</sup>But his master replied, ‘You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? <sup>27</sup>Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. <sup>28</sup>So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. <sup>29</sup>For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. <sup>30</sup>As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’

### 3.3 Matt 25:14-30: A Self Contained Unit

The goal here is to determine whether or not the pericope is self-contained, as well as to identify its boundaries. The parable of the talents in Matt 25:14-30, is self-contained. It begins with an introductory phrase *hōsper gar* (for it is like) in v. 14. Because the transitional conjunction *gar* (for) is one of the timid words, the Greek translation places it first in the sentence, resulting in the translation “for it is like.” This begins with the opening phrase of the parable of the wise and foolish virgins in 25:1. Similarly, in v. 30, the pericope concludes with the typical Matthean formula about “the outer darkness” or “weeping and gnashing of teeth.” (see 8:22; 22:13; 24:51).<sup>9</sup>

The parable is related to the preceding context (25:1-13), as the story begins abruptly with “for it is like” with no explanation of what it means. However, the story follows a parable that is explicitly said to refer to the kingdom of heaven in 25:1, 20, and the new parable seamlessly joins the watch statement of v. 13 with “like” (*hōsper*).<sup>10</sup> The parables of the two servants (24:45-51), the parable of the wise and foolish virgins (25:1-13), and the parable of the talents all expand on the theme of watchfulness (25:14-30). All three add to the picture of what constitutes responsible behavior in the run-up to the arrival of the Son of Man.<sup>11</sup> However, unlike the previous parable, this one suggests what that readiness must be. It is not to be passively waiting, but to get to work and make

<sup>9</sup> Hagner, 733.

<sup>10</sup> Luz, 247.

<sup>11</sup> Harrington S.J, Daniel J. (1991) *The Gospel of Matthew: Sacra Pagina series*. Vol. 1. Collegeville; Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 353.

the most of the opportunities that have been given to us.<sup>12</sup> As a result, this is consistent with Matthew's eschatological teaching, which is intended to motivate the church to appropriate behavior rather than to satisfy curiosity about the future. Similarly, the following context (25:31-46) is related to the parable of the talents, with its theme of reward and condemnation. In the parable, the Lord rewards the two profitable servants and punishes the one who buried his talent (vv. 21, 23, 28-30), and punishes those who lived only for their own benefit (vv. 31-40). As a result, according to Daniel J. Harrington S.J., “this parable leads into the judgment scene in Matt 25:31-46, in which the Son of Man acts as a judge for “all the Gentiles.” As a result, the Matthean parable of the talents is clearly concerned with the coming of the Son of Man and how one should behave in anticipation of it.<sup>13</sup>

### 3.4 Structure of Matt 25:14-30

The parable tells the story of an assignment, the execution, and accountability at the end of the execution period. As a result, we will study the parable using the dramatic structure outlined below:

Vv. 14-15: the assignment

Vv. 16-18: the execution

Vv. 19-30: and the accountability

The criterion for the structurization is the change of scene, which is determined by the presence or otherwise of the master. The master is present in scene one, the assignment. The master is absent in scene two, the execution, and reappears in scene three, the accountability. To be more faithful to the parable's emphasis on the third servant syndrome, divide the accountability scene into two parts: profitable accountability: the first and second servants (vv 19-23) and unprofitable accountability: the third servant (vv 24-30). That gives us a four-part structure.

The benefit of this four-part structure is that it emphasizes the contrast between the profitable and unprofitable servants, which is central to the parable. In fact, Warren W. Wiersbe titles the story, “the Parable of the Profitable and Unprofitable Servants”<sup>14</sup> rather than the Parable of the Talents.

## 4. Contextual Analytical Reading of Matt 25:14-30

Verses 14-15: The Assignment

The parable is about a man (*anthropos*, lit. human being) about to travel. Before setting off, he summons his servants (*douloi*, lit. slaves) and entrusts (*paradidomi*, to hand over) his property to

<sup>12</sup> Carson, D. A, R. T, France, J. A. Motyer and G. J. Wenham (ed.) (1994) *New Biblical Commentary*. Leicester, England: Inter Varsity Press, 937-938.

<sup>13</sup> Harrington, 354.

<sup>14</sup> Wiersbe, Warren (1996) *The Bible Exposition Commentary*. Electronic Edition 1989.; Repr., Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 46.

them. To one servant he gave five talents, to another two talents, and yet to a third he gave only one talent. The text points out that he gave “to each according to his ability” (v 15). Then he went away.

What is a talent? The talent (*talanta*) was not really a coin, but a unit of weight of approximately 26kg. Here it means an amount of silver or gold weighing one talent. Hence, the specific monetary exchange rate for a talent is not easy to calculate. According to The Bible Exposition Commentary, “a talent was worth about twenty years’ wages”.<sup>15</sup> On account of this lack of a specific value for the talent, some scholars suggest that the word ‘talents’ here is used to denote an indefinitely large sum of money. The word “talent” has come down to us in the English language with a metaphorical meaning, and now refers to innate human abilities or gifts. In the parable, the talents do not represent abilities but opportunities for the servants to use their abilities.

Note that (i) there is no explicit instruction on what they should do with the talents; it is presumed. The amount is so big that the servants understand that it was not given as pocket money or occasional bonus but a solid investment. The narrator anticipates the reader’s problem regarding why the servants are given different amounts of talent. He tells us that they are given “to each according to his/her ability” (*kata tēn idian dunamin*, v 15). Barnes takes this to mean, “according as he saw each one was adapted to improve it,”<sup>16</sup> that is, according to the master’s judgment of the individual’s ability to add value to his investment. (ii) Every servant received something, at least one talent. No servant was left empty-handed. (iii) Just as the investment in the servants was unequal, so also the expected income. As Jesus explains elsewhere, “to whom much is given, of him will much be required” (see Luke 12:48).

#### Verses 16-18: The Execution

These verses tell us about the servants’ response to the assignment given to them. We are told that the first servant, the one who received five talents. Went off at once and traded with them, and made a profit of five more talents. The second servant, who received two talents, acted in the same way and made a corresponding profit of two more talents. The adversative *ho de* (but) introduces the response of the third servant, showing that he did not follow the footsteps of the first two servants but acted contrariwise. The third servant, the one who received the one talent “went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master’s money” (v 18).

We see that, although numerically there are three servants, typically there are two kinds of servants. The first and second servants belong to the same kind of servants, while the third servant belongs

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<sup>15</sup> Warren, 124.

<sup>16</sup> Barnes, Albert (1851) *Notes, Explanatory and Practical on the Gospels: Designed for Sabbath School Teachers and Bible Classes*. London: Benjamin L. Green, 289.



in a different class. The major difference between the two classes is clearly seen in their qualitatively different responses to the master's trust and investment in them.

Firstly, the former set of servants, represented by the first and second servants, went on or proceeded (*poreomai*) immediately (*eutheōs*) whereas the latter set, represented solely by the third servant, merely went away or departed (*aperchomai*). The one gives the impression of continuing with the project, the other of discontinuing. We also see the sense of zeal and prompt action in the former that is lacking in the latter. Secondly, the former group put the talents to work (*ergasato en autois*, lit “worked with them”) whereas the latter only dug the ground and hid his. No wonder, finally, the former group returned a profit and the latter did not.

#### Verses 14-15: The First and Second Servants’ Profitable Accountability

After a long time, the master of the servants returned. The reference to the longtime of absence is seen by scholars to be a reference to the delayed *parousia* (second coming). Matthew's community has only one master. “You are not to be called masters, for you have one master, the Christ” (Matt 23:10). The reference to the long time before the return of the master could be indicative that Matthew and his community have given up on the idea of an imminent return of Christ.

The one thing the master does on his return is settle accounts with his servants (v. 19). The accounts given by the first and second servants are proportionally identical: “Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents” (v 20) and “Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents” (v 22).

Even more noteworthy is the fact that the master responds to both of them in the same exact terms without any reference to the numerical difference of their talents or profits. To either of them the master gives the same complimentary reply, “Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master” (vv 21, 23). It appears that the master is judging them on relative and not on absolute terms. On absolute terms, the first servant made more profit than the second. He made five talents while the second only made two. On relative terms, however, we find that both score equally. Either of them achieved a 100% return on the investment (ROI): the servant that was given five talents made five talents more, and the servant that was given two talents made two talents more. Again, the Gospel principle of “to whom much is given, of him will much be required” (Luke 12:48) seems to be operative here.

Note, finally, that, as in real life, the reward for good work is more work: “you have been trustworthy in a few things; I will put you in charge of many things.” The ultimate reward, however, is to share in the “joy of your master” himself (v 23).

#### Verses 24-30: The Third Servant Unprofitable Accountability

“Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward” (v 24).

His entrance marks the beginning of the last scene. This scene stretches all the way down to the end of the parable in v. 30, “As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” His entrance changes the positive mood that characterised the master’s meeting with his servants up to this point. “Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; so I was afraid, and I went and hide your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours” (vv 24-25). In essence, he is returning the talent given to him, giving reasons why he did not invest it as the others did, talk less of making a profit. He gives us the reason why he hid the talent in the ground: he was afraid. Why was he afraid? He “knew” his master to be “a harsh man, who reaps where he did not sow, and gathers where they did not scatter seed.” The reader knows this to be untrue because the master sowed the seed a long time ago when he invested his talents with his servants. He is, therefore, justifiably entitled to reap now. The reader is left with a doubt whether the third servant really knows his master as he claims he does? But his master replied, “You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest” (vv 26-27).

The master is irate. He accuses the servant of wickedness and laziness. For a servant on whom so much has been invested to turn around and tell his employer that he has no right to expect any profit from him is sheer wickedness. The Greek word is *ponēros* (bad, evil). He accuses his servant of being a bad man. Secondly, the master accuses the servant of being lazy. It is possible that the real reason why the third servant did not go into business was that he was not prepared for the trouble and hard work involved in making money. If that is so then the servant's excuse that his master was a harsh man would only be a rationalization to cover up his laziness. If indeed he was afraid of losing the capital by engaging in trading, why did he not engage in the safe investment of lodging the money with the bankers so that it would yield some interest?

Instead of a reward like the first two servants had, the third servant got a reprimand and punishment. The talent was taken from him and given to the servant who had ten talents. And he was to be thrown out into “the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (v 30). His fear of losing the talent came true, he lost it. In addition, he lost the goodwill, protection, and magnanimity of the master as well as the security and joy shared by the other servants who continued in the service of the master.

The narrator gives us the moral of the parable, “for to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away” (v. 29). This saying is proverbial and shares some of the hyperbolic character of proverbs. It means, as Barnes explains, that “whosoever rightly improves what is committed to him shall

receive more, or shall be rewarded; but he that misimproves what is committed to him shall not be rewarded<sup>17</sup> but shall rather be further denied.

#### 4.2 Different Understandings of Faithfulness to Tradition

Many Gospel parables follow the two-ways motif, one good and the other bad, in which the hearers are implicitly invited to choose one rather than the other. The *locus classicus* of the two-ways motif is Psalm 1, which speaks of the just whose path leads to blessings and the wicked whose path leads to doom. Such parables include: the wheat and the two (Matt 13:24-30), the two sons (Matt 21:28-32), the sheep and the goats (Matt 25:31- 46), the two debtors (Luke 7:41-43), the rich man and Lazarus, (Luke 16: 19-31), the prodigal son and his elder brother (Luke 15: 11-32), the Pharisee and the tax collector (Luke 18:9-14). If one reads the characters of the first and second servants in parable as representing the same type, then the parable can be seen as following the two-ways motif. In this case, the reader is implicitly invited to follow the first way, the two-ways of the first and second servants and not the other way, the way of the third servant.

Nevertheless, the fact that the parable gives us three characters rather than two shows this parable is not a typical two-ways parable. In most of the parables that feature the two-ways motif, the two ways stand in a relation of direct opposition, such as the just and the wicked, the godly and the ungodly, the faithful and the unfaithful. In the Parable of the Talents, however, the third servant does not stand in a relation of direct opposition to the first and second servants. Rather, he seems to stand in the gray area between faithfulness, represented by the servants who turned in a profit out of the talents they received, and unfaithfulness, represented by the hypothetical servant who made a loss and could not return the capital talents that he was entrusted with.

The third servant was not a bad man. Like the first two servants he also wanted to prove himself faithful to the master on the day of reckoning. He also wanted to impress the master by making sure that the master, at least, got back what he had entrusted to him. Many investors in a period of economic turmoil would be happy simply to have back the exact amount they invested. Returning to investors the exact amount that they invested in the first place, is certainly not the worst case scenario. We can, therefore, say that the third servant does not stand in a relationship of direct opposition to the first two servants.

In fact, there are many qualities that all three servants have in common. (i) All three see to be happy with their job as servants of the master. They want to keep their job. In fact, one of the rewards of the profitable servants is continuation in the master's service and one of the losses suffered by the unprofitable servant is being fired from his service. (ii) All three servants want to please the master, or at least do not want to displease him. The third servant buried the talent because he did not want to displease the master by losing the in risky business transactions. From this, one can deduce that (iii) all three wanted to both trustworthy servants. The third servant

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<sup>17</sup> Barnes, 291.

thought that the best way not to lose his masters trust was to maintain what he had been given and return it in tact on demand. The first two understood that the only way to gain their master's trust was to improve and add value to what has been handed over to them.

It is significant that the word used at the beginning of the parable (v 14) for giving the talents to the servants is *paradidōmi*, (to hand over), from which we got the word *paradosis*, meaning "tradition." Ultimately, the parable comes down to different understandings on how to preserve the tradition that the master has handed over to his servants. The disciples to whom Jesus tells this parable would definitely understand it as a teaching on the right and wrong understandings of how to preserve the tradition that their master Jesus was handing over to them before embarking on the long, indefinite journey, the period of absence from the disciples until his return at the Second Coming. They would understand that the challenge of the parable was for every disciple to make effort to add value to the tradition, since trying to preserve the tradition as one had received it, without adding value to it would, in the end, be tantamount to diminishing the tradition.

#### 4.3 Focus on the Third Servant

The structure of the parable reveals that the largest section of the parable is the final section that focuses on the third servant. This shows us that the character of the third is at the centre of the point that this parable wants to make. It will help us, therefore, to look at this character more closely in order to discover the cause of his tragedy in spite of his good intentions. Relative to the other two servants, the third servant might be less endowed for business life the master gave them talents, "each one according to his ability," he received the least. The fact of not being a business magnet, however, was not his undoing. Lack of opportunity was not his problem either. His lack of motivation to engage in productive enterprise can be traced to these three reasons:

- i. Negative understanding of faithfulness: He thought that his duty lay in preserving intact the talent he had received and reproducing it on demand without any loss (or gain).
- ii. Unwillingness to risk failure. Nothing risked, nothing gained. His fear of possible failure immobilized him.
- iii. Servile fear of the master. His unrealistic fear of the master was fueled by a negative view of him as mean.
- iv. Belief that his talent was insignificant. It is possible that the third servant was immobilized by the relative insignificance of the talent he got. How could someone with just one talent compete with another that has five talents in the same market place? Thoughts like this could immobilize a potential trader or producer.

When these psycho-spiritual "symptoms" that we have diagnosed above occur consistently together in the same personality, we can, using the language of medical pathology, speak of the disease as the third-servant syndrome. We speak of it as a disease for two reasons: (a) because it is a contagious infection, and (b) because it is curable.

#### 4.4 The Third Servant Syndrome in the Field of African Theology

Philip Emeagwali in his article titled, “Africa Must Produce or Perish”.<sup>18</sup> This advice, which applies to theologians as well as to entrepreneurs, is in sharp contrast to the attitude of the Nigerian scholar we mentioned at the beginning of this article. Lack of creative research and publishing has remained a formidable challenge to Nigerian theologians. The field of theology in Nigeria now has the paradoxical distinction of being the field of human enterprise with the largest body of trained experts yet making the least contribution to human development and nation building. The *status quo* is unsatisfactory. The interest of this research is not to dwell on the cultural and infrastructural challenges that militate against academic pastoral productivity in Nigeria, but on the limiting beliefs that make us bury our talents in the sand, and how to overcome them.

The first step in the cure of a psycho-spiritual disease is to admit that we have it. The third-servant syndrome not only exists in the Nigerian theological camp, but exists there in epidemic proportions. Its symptoms are evident no matter where one looks at it. The first symptom: the negative understanding of faithfulness. Nigerian theologians generally seek to be faithful to the Christian tradition that they have received. But there are many who understand this faithfulness in terms of conserving and handing on tradition in the exact form and formulation that they themselves received it. Such theologians see no need to seek a new way of understanding and reformulating tradition. They need to hear again the words of T. Rhondda Williams: “for growing souls living in a growing universe, a stagnant theology is impossible.... Theology must grow, as maps do, when more territory is discovered” (Williams vii).

The second symptom of the third-servant syndrome is the unwillingness to risk failure. This is a disease that affects especially the highly talented and the highly critical. Their work as teachers of theology often involves assessing and criticising other people’s works. As a result, they develop a perfectionist tendency that is slow to submit to other people’s criticisms. This means that they are slow to write, and often wind up living a very unproductive academic career.

The third symptom is servile fear of the master often arising from viewing him in a negative light. Theology is the mother of ethics. The theologian's personal answer to the dominical question, “who do you say that I am?” is often determinative of his or her practical theological engagement. Yes, it may be true that God does not change, yet it equally true that our knowledge of God, and especially our language of God, need constant updating in every generation and cultural *milieu*. St. Patrick used the shamrock to demonstrate to the Irish of his time the reality of the Blessed Trinity. The same argument will convince few people in Nigeria today.

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<sup>18</sup> Emeagwali, Philip (2008) “Africa Must Produce or Perish” *The Nation* Vol. 21 no. 096 Wednesday, May 14, 230.

The fourth symptom, finally, is the belief that one's talent is insignificant. Some people are disinclined to step into the field of theological dialogue because they believe that there are many more gifted individuals who could do it better than they. Like we pointed out, this must be one of the reasons that kept the third servant from engaging in productive enterprise. It helps to know that, though we are called to be productive, we are not all called to engage in the same kind of trade. Some may trade in cows and others in chicken, each one according to his or her ability, interests and opportunity. The people of God need cows and they also need chickens. The productivity of the highly talented and that of the less highly talented are all necessary. What one should bear in mind is that in the end, on the master's day of reckoning, the highly talented and the relatively less talented will have the same compliments and rewards, so long as they have tried to use wisely and productively the talents that were invested in them.

#### **4.5 Towards a New Understanding of Faithfulness in Theology**

Would the master have punished a hypothetical fourth servant as severely as he punished the third servant if this fourth servant had dared to trade with his talent and lost some or all of it in the process? Your answer to this question depends on your view of the master. Considering the teachings of Jesus in similar parables, my answer would be from other parables, such as the Workers in the Vineyard, we learn that the master rewards his workers not in absolute or mathematical terms but in relative terms of how much one has tried to do one's best. From this, one can conclude that if a hypothetical fourth servant had put in his best effort in trading and still made a loss, he would have fared better than the third servant who made no efforts whatsoever. This should form the basis of our new and more liberating understanding of faithfulness.

One best definition of theology is that of St. Anselm of Canterbury's *fides quaerens intellectum* (faith seeking understanding). From this understanding, we learn at least three things: (i) Faith is a requirement for doing theology. No matter how good we are in the business of theology, we can never get to a point where understanding will replace with. Faith here includes not only intellectual assent to a statement of belief but also personal trust in God and obedience to his will. If God has given us some talent, no matter little it may seem in comparison with other people's talents, faith demands that we put it to work. (ii) The operative word in the definition is "seeking." This is the activity that is proper to the theologian. No matter how much he or she may already have found seeking, for the theologian, will never come to an end. A statement attributed to Andrew of St. Victor is very relevant here:

"If the fathers have already explained the Scriptures;" Andrew of St Victor asked. "why do I need to?" He answered that truth dwells "deep" and "screens herself from mortal sight." There is always more truth to dig up because truth "hides, yet so as never wholly to be hidden. Careful seekers find her that, carefully sought, she may again be found. None draw her forth in her completeness but by degrees. The fathers and forefather have found her; something is left for the sons and descendants to find. So

always: she is sought; something is still to seek; found, and there is something still to find.”<sup>19</sup>

(iii) Understanding is necessary, faith alone (*sola fides*) is not sufficient. Faith and understanding are the two wings with which a theologian flies. Take away understanding and the theologian becomes a blind believer; take away faith and he or she falls into rationalism.

The important task facing theologians in Nigeria in the area of Inculturation is a faith seeking understanding. The quest of what faith can mean for Nigerians in the concrete exigencies of their social, cultural, political and economic realities is a work of faith seeking understanding. Without this seeking, faith runs the risk of being seen as irrelevant or superficial in the concrete life situations of Nigerian believers.

## 5. Recommendations

This article recommends that People must abandon the practice of making excuses for failing to accomplish what they should have done to advance theological studies in the country. Excuses abound in Nigeria' as to why many people are refusing to join in theological endeavors since the few who have done so have had little impact.

One possible technique for increasing the use of abilities in the Church is to make "use your talents" a subject in theological schools. Because priests, pastors, and evangelists play such an important role in teaching and leading congregations, it is critical to awaken them by teaching the theological importance of talent management as an essential and integral part of Christian life for Jesus Christ's disciples as they await Christ's second coming. To correctly understand Matthew 25:14-30's parable of the talents, the subject of "use of the talents" should include an interpretation and exegesis of it.

## 6. Conclusion

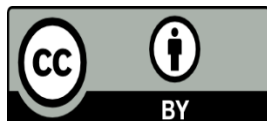
The Parable of the Talents shows us that there is a certain understanding of faith which, in the long run, is tantamount to unfaithfulness. Such an understanding of faithfulness, as represented by the third servant in the parable, is one that keeps the theologian from engaging in creative and productive research and publishing, in the fear of making a mistake or in the mistaken notion that here is no novelty in the faith worth writing about. Unfortunately, this immobilizing understanding of faithfulness is prevalent in Nigerian Christianity, and especially in the theological circles. The parable challenges us to abandon these misconceptions and embrace a life of productivity in the theological trade.

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<sup>19</sup>Leithart, Peter J. (2007) *Online at <http://www.leithart.com/archIves/002920.php>*. on Wednesday, April 04.

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