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Faithful in Mission: An Alternative Reading of Matthew 25:14–30

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Abstract: We are all bound to our cultural worldview. It influences how we read Scripture and find it meaningful. What are ways that we can read this parable in a way that makes us conscious of our cultural predispositions to reading it in a specific way. In this article I attempt such a reading in order to build an alternate reading to a greater extent faithful to the text. The purpose in doing so is to provide a way of critiquing the decline of membership in the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) churches that are biblically and missiologically sound.

God is good. I have been blessed with the opportunity to be an LCMS missionary in Latin America for twenty years. I have studied anthropology, ethnomusicology, and linguistics. I have taught cultural semiotics and contextualization of New Testament worldview and other courses dealing with theology and culture at Concordia Theological Seminary Ft. Wayne, Indiana, and the Center for Hispanic Studies in St. Louis. So, I have an ongoing special interest in exploring culture's¹ role in the hermeneutic process.

Exactly how much does culture contribute to the meaning we give a biblical narrative? It is impossible to find meaning in a story without reflecting on some perceived similar association with observed elements in the text. In other words, we are never *neutral* in our reading of a text. We cannot completely step outside our culture or how we give meaning to the world around us. At best, we can translate the meaning. Culture opens our eyes to observe only those parts of the text that have meaning for us. In this way, our culture provides the framework for interpreting scripture and its application for Christian life.



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While it is impossible to be *neutral* in interpreting a text, it is equally impossible to simply extricate the theological significance of a text independently from the culture in which the narrative was created. We cannot separate the cultural elements from the theological meaning, although it has been tried (*Entmythologisierung*), in order to arrive at a core *truth* void of cultural form. Being cognizant how your cultural worldview possibly influences the interpretation of the text can provide needed *checks and balances* for questioning *what* and *why* you might find something meaningful in a text. Recognizing the role of culture in communicating and interpreting aids in uncovering the meaning of a text. Doing so can discover different themes or nuances in the text without necessarily compromising the truth of the text theologically.

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Personalizing this, the biblical narrative is only meaningful and recognizable to me. When I read, I observe only those elements that have meaning for me, within my worldview.² At first, certain textual elements will be observed and thought to share the same meaning that they do within my own culture. However, though the textual elements may appear the same, they may refer to something completely different in the other cultural setting.³ As I interpret the elements of the narrative, I naturally will find their meaning based on what those elements refer to within my own culture. In so doing, I may possibly bypass the significance of what they mean within the author's purpose.

A specific example from Scripture of the effect of Western/Capitalist cultural worldview can be illustrated here. In Mathew 22:21, Jesus ends the dispute to whom taxes need be paid; a trap set by the Pharisees and Herodians with the words, "Whose visage do you see on this coin?" Their reply, "Caesar's." To which Jesus replies, "Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's and unto God what is God's."⁴ My Western/capitalist/political cultural paradigm recognizes the signs—taxes, government, paying taxes—as they refer to something I do. It is therefore thought that this directs the obedience of civilians to their government, and the paying of taxes as a God-given directive. What these same signs signify to the Pharisees and the Herodians lies outside my cultural paradigm and so goes unnoticed. I might understand Jesus' words, "Render to God what is God's" as a directive to stewardship or paying taxes. Since I do not share the Jewish perspective on this, as did the Pharisees and Herodians, Jesus' words signify something different; they have no sign-referent identification. Jesus is not talking about the coin and the rendering,

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but rather the relationship to the visage and the rendering. Jesus' words point to Genesis 1:26, that "we are created in the image and likeness of God." "Render Caesar his coin; render yourself to God" is a slap in the face to the Pharisees and Herodians. "You are faithful to Caesar in what belongs to him. But you belong to God and are not faithful to Him."

It is my purpose in this article to attempt an alternate reading that may discover a different thematic focus in Matthew 25:14–30. The meaning will then serve as the basis for a critique of the present decline of membership in most mainline denominations.

I believe a popular understanding of this parable is influenced by a North American/Western/capitalist cultural worldview. The problem I perceive is the tendency to jump to a theological meaning based on that worldview while overlooking an alternative focal point perhaps more faithful to the author's cultural context. What's more, as you will see, the North American/Western/capitalist cultural worldview has influenced the choice of English terms used for the Greek, which in turn has influenced the interpretation of the parable theologically as well as missiologically.

Exposing My Cultural Interpretive Paradigm

I read, the Greek words *money, slaves, masters, investment, banking, gains, lazy, faithful, put the money to work, ability* from a Western capitalist worldview. Accordingly, within my culture, the meaning of the words is found within a network of related terms that I use in a particular category: *finances*.⁵

Since the use of these terms altogether has meaning in this category, I am not surprised that English language commentaries focus on the *financial*. *Money* is discussed in many commentaries on Matthew 25 and has served to influence the overall meaning of the narrative along the concepts of related categories, such as *investment banking*. This influence, in turn, leads to related terms within my worldview such as *industriousness* related to the *return on the investment*. Accordingly, by *gains* (κερδαίνω, BDAG⁶), its use in this category refers to *financial gains* as the result of *financial investment*. This leads me to believe that the slaves got a return on their money because they were *industrious*. Additionally, since my Western/capitalist worldview values *industriousness* and the *acquisition of goods*, this accumulation of material possessions is tantamount to *success*. From this point, it is easy to equate *success* with being *faithful*.

In my worldview, this category of meaning would then lead me to interpret the slaves' *abilities* (δύναμις, BDAG) as a reference to their *potential industriousness*. According to my cultural values, *industriousness* serves to assess the quality and character of the slave, thus describing him as *able*. I am led to conclude, then, that

this is the reason that *more was given* (καθίστημι, BDAG). The fact that the slaves went out directly to make money confirms their industriousness and their ability. The fact that they brought in a *gain* proves their market-ability and means that they were *faithful* with what was entrusted to them. (Note: that even *entrusted* [παραδίδωμι, BDAG] is understood within the scope of productivity.) The one slave who does not *put it to work*, or *invest* (ἐργάζομαι, BDAG) and do business is seen as *lazy* (ὀκνηρός, BDAG). He is the opposite of culturally prized *Western* industriousness. In the text, therefore, Western/capitalist culture lauds the two industrious slaves and despises the one slave who buried the money (κρύπτω, BDAG).

In this parable, we have an example of a word in the Greek culture that was translated by a similar word in English. Each word, however, means something different in each culture. Each word belongs to two distinct categories of meaning in each culture. The word is *talents*. In the King James translation, the English word *talents* is used to translate Τάλαντα (τάλαντον, BDAG). While the Greek word refers to a *measure of silver or money* and is a *financial* category, the similar English word is in a category that refers to *performance ability*. Because of the confusion, *talents* is used in a figurative meaning signifying personal *performance abilities* and compromises the Greek literal meaning, *money*. As a result, Western cultural values commonly read talents as referring to specific gifts that will produce gains if used properly. Within the cultural worldview, then, the English translation influences the English interpretation relating faithfulness with stewardship of personal abilities. And, to the contrary, unfaithful stewards of such gifts show laziness and lack of industriousness that will result in the loss of the gifts, as well as the returns.

Preparing for an Alternative Reading

If I am conscious of my culture and its influence on my interpretation, might I intentionally adopt an alternate reading that more closely centers on an original meaning other than *investment, bankers, abilities, talents*? Will alternative meanings of Greek words be possible or necessary to reflect this? Are there any structural devices within the narrative, linguistic or otherwise, that might help facilitate a different thematic focus, e.g., chiasms, binary oppositions, play on words?

I begin with a reading of what I observe to be the central concepts and words. The fact that I am identifying these as possibly significant lets me know that, in some way, these elements have a meaning within my own cultural worldview; otherwise I would not have noticed them. I want to question their perceived meaning within my own cultural worldview. The question is, are they significant? Do they mean the same thing? If not, what is the different meaning? In the course of my study, I found the following alternative meanings to Greek terms helpful to an alternate reading.

They are highlighted in bold. I also found Scripture passages that contain the alternate meanings and serve to clarify the alternative reading.

παραδίδωμι—translated as “entrust,” meaning to turn things over to another, commit, commend, and surrender. (BDAG)

ὑπάρχω—translated as “property,” meaning things I am in possession of, exist, I being, am. (BDAG)

δύναμις—translated as “abilities,” meaning physical power, force, might, ability, efficacy, energy, **authority**, and marvelous work. (BDAG)

τάλαντον—translated as “talents,” meaning money, a weight of silver. (BDAG)

ἐργάζομαι—translated as “put the money to work,” meaning to make gains by trading, to perform, **and to win over**. (BDAG)

συναίρω—translated as “settled,” to take up together, settle accounts, make a **reckoning**, to **compare accounts**. (BDAG)

λόγος—translated as “accounts,” meaning a **statement**, speech, analogy, a word as embodying an idea, reported speech, narration. (BDAG)

κερδαίνω—translated as “gain,” **meaning to increase, to avoid loss, to regain**. (BDAG)

ἀγαθός και πιστός—translated as “good and faithful,” meaning of joyful character and trustworthy, honorable and believing. (BDAG)

καθίστημι—translated as “put in charge of,” meaning set in order, **appoint**, put in charge. (BDAG)

χαρά—I translated as “joy,” meaning gladness, a source of joy, joy (BDAG)

κρύπτω—translated as “hid,” meaning to **conceal (that it might not become known)**, escape notice. (BDAG)

ὀκνηρός—translated as “lazy,” meaning **timid**, shrinking, **idle**, troublesome, slothful (BDAG)

βάλλω—translated as “deposit,” **meaning to throw or let go of a thing not caring where it falls, to scatter**. (BDAG)

τραπεζίτης—translated as “banker,” meaning money trader, banker. (BDAG)

I also observed what would appear in my culture to be themes or concepts in binary opposition in the structure. Some of these observations are textual and others are interpretive.

Observed in the text include the following: slave versus master; entrusted versus fearful; good and faithful versus evil and lazy; joy versus outer darkness; multiples (talents) versus singularities (one talent); put the money to work versus bury the money; cruel versus benevolent; enter into the joy versus throw out the slave.

Interpretive observations⁷ include: faithful versus doubtful; to engage versus disengage; security versus insecurity; fellowship versus aloneness; knowledge versus action; steward of possession versus steward of relationship.

Reading with an Intentional Altered Focus

I notice that the Matthew 25 parable has elements similar to the parable of the sower and the seed (Mt 13:12) in two ways.

First, in the Matthew 25 parable, the one slave claims that the master “*harvest[s]* where [he] did not *sow*, and *gather[s]* where [he] did not *scatter* seed.” This characterizes the master as cruel, but it perhaps describes the master as the rightful owner of both what is harvested (*gains*) and what is sown (*talents*). If the master owns everything, being *faithful* relates to the actual going and scattering of the talents for fruit to be born and not to the industriousness of the sower. The *talents* are not the reward or payment for the *ability*; they are what enables.

Secondly, there seems to be a play on words/concepts of equal rudeness when Jesus responds to the slave’s claim by using the word βαλεῖν, translated as in a *financial* category of meaning, *to deposit* (βάλλω, BDAG). Figuratively, however, it can alternately mean to *scatter or throw something not caring where it falls*. The meaning: “If you knew I claimed everything that was harvested and scattered as mine, why then didn’t you scatter my money around so that I could harvest it.” In both parables, the sending and the sowing brings the harvest.

In the Matthew 25 parable, the master *turns over* (παρέδωκεν, BDAG) what is in his *possession* (ὕπαρχοντα, BDAG). The slaves were to care for it on behalf of their master. The slaves were given additional money in order to care for their master’s belongings. There are no criteria mentioned to determine what *ability* (δύναμις, BDAG) is. The slaves’ abilities (δύναμιν, BDAG) might be their earned authority, experience in service, perhaps seniority, or specific to what they normally had been responsible for up until now. No criteria are given, and so no conclusions can be drawn as to what constitutes the abilities.

We might well assume that the money given to the slaves is not based on the worthiness of ability. It is based simply on the master’s selection. Their ability is determined by the selection of the master, not an inherent quality or character, just as the Virgin Mary was “favored” by God without regard to her virtue or other positive qualities. Besides, if the master had chosen a slave who had shown previous *abilities*, he would not have picked a slave who was lazy. All three slaves were given money

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by the graciousness of the master. They did not earn it. The Holy Spirit gives His gifts as He chooses (1 Cor 12:11).

The slaves' *abilities* lie in the fact that they were chosen. They were chosen to have authority over the master's possessions. The authority came from the master, not the slaves' *abilities*. The money belonged to the master and not the slaves. They were chosen to do what the master had previously taught them. Two of the slaves *put the money to work* (ἠργάσατο, BDAG) probably in the same way they saw their master work it.

Did the slaves trust their master? This question is raised due to the comment of the one slave who feared the master for being cruel. He feared judgment, and though he had the authority and the money, he was afraid to use them. On the other hand, the other two slaves did not fear. It can be assumed they were on good relations with the master and did not *work the money* out of fear.

What then motivated the slaves to do what they did? Was it their faith in the master, or their fear of the master? More specifically, did the two slaves trust that the money, which the master gave, was sufficient and would accomplish what it was supposed to do? It's the master's money, and they do not doubt. The slave who buried the money, however, did not have such faith, neither in the master nor in what the master gave to carry out the task. The two slaves acted in faith; the one slave acted in unbelief. For the two slaves, then, the money that the master provided rendered the gains. But, the focus of the one slave was on himself, his work. Also, slaves during this time were allowed to have businesses through which they could purchase their own freedom. The text does not say that they wished to do this, but it could have well been assumed that this was the motivation to engage in business while the master was away, as he gave them the right to do.

The concept of *gains*, however, is a problematic point for a Western/capitalist worldview. The word (ἐκέδησα, BDAG) has the alternative meaning to *win over*. It can also mean to *regain*, or *to win back*. Examples from Scripture include Matthew 18:15.⁸ It can mean to gain someone to faith in Christ, as in 1 Peter 3:1⁹ and 1 Corinthians 9:19–22.¹⁰ I believe it is significant that the Greek term for *gain* does not merely fall into the cultural category of *financial*.

Later, when their master returns, the slaves *talk through their accounts* (συνάει λόγον, BDAG). It was rightfully the master's, although he did not sow it or harvest it. Seeing that the slaves were faithful in taking care of his possessions, the master grants them their freedom (εἴσελθε εἰς τὴν χαρὰν τοῦ κυρίου σου), his joy. Though the gains made with their master's property could have possibly secured their freedom, they were faithful and returned their master's property.

Was turning the money over to the master the reason they were called *faithful*? If their faith was placed in the authority and power of the master's money, then their gains were not based on their industriousness, but rather on their *sent-ness*. They went forth immediately. Good and faithful, then, deals with the going and the doing, the *scattering* (βαλεῖν, BDAG) of the *talents* and the reliance on the master's power and authority, thereby to do as the master had done. The one slave, however, was *lazy*, a term that I culturally link with lack of *industriousness*. However, that is not the case here. Here, *lazy* (ὀκνηρέ, BDAG) has the alternative meaning of *timid* (ὀκνηρέ, BDAG). The one slave was *timid*, *shrinking*. He was timid in using the authority and power of the master due to the lack of faith. Though sent, he did not go.

Good and faithful, then, deals with the going and the doing, the *scattering* (βαλεῖν, BDAG) of the *talents* and the reliance on the master's power and authority, thereby to do as the master had done.

Considering an opposing scenario reinforces even more that the slaves' faith was placed in the power and authority of their master. What if the slaves had gone out and lost everything? Did they consider this possibility? Rather, they trusted in his graciousness beyond their own loss or failure. They were faithful, *not* defined by being *industrious*, but in *risking* their own lives and their potential to be freed. On the other hand, the slave who buried the money opted for self-security and remained a slave. This slave's lack of faith makes him content and secure with what he has and therefore does not risk the possibility of loss. He in fact, chooses to save his own life while the two slaves run the risk of losing everything for the sake of their master (Lk 9:24).

The context of the parable and the theological scope of the chapter carry the narrative into an eschatological context. Here, it fits with the previous parable of the ten virgins (Mt 25:1–13) and the subsequent narrative regarding the final judgment (Mt 25:31–46). Judgment in both of these contexts is based on the ability to persevere in the faith until the end. The first parable shows the faith of expectation of the coming kingdom; the second shows faith moved to action of the faithful. Both are aspects of a living faith. This faith is based on a relationship. In the present parable, the two slaves wanted to please their master with whom they had a relationship in faith. They acted out of faith as the fruit of their relationship. The one slave's preoccupation was with the possessions of the master. He hid and did not live out this relationship by engaging it in the world around him. He did not have a faith relationship with the master.

When accounts are rendered in the final judgment of the parable, the master sets the two slaves free to enjoy his joy (Jn 8:36). This joy is the fellowship with the

master. And the result of that fellowship is the authority and power of the master to be appointed over greater things (Καταστήσω, BDAG).¹¹ At the same time, the remaining slave is to be thrown out into darkness. His judgment is to be alone; the opposite of fellowship. Faith = fellowship; no faith = alone.

The basis for judgment, then, was not faithfulness based on industriousness and productivity; nor was it the return on the investment of talents. It was the faith relationship with the master that trusted in the master's powerful gift so that all risk could be taken. Engaged in a faith relationship with their master, they neither hid nor hoarded what was given to them; rather, they were empowered to go and engage the master's possessions with the world. They confidently risked everything. The one slave was not engaged in such a relationship with the master. He was not empowered to go out and engage the world. He took no risk, but rather found security in hoarding and holding on to what he had. The two slaves risked everything because of the relationship with the master.

Comments on the Mission of the Church and Declining LCMS Membership

Missiological Potential from This Parable

To me the missiological potential of the parable is clear. The focus is on a faith relationship with the master that leads to risk-taking. The *Τάλαντα* (*talents*) refer to God's Word and the faith that we possess to use that Word in everyday life. This is what all three slaves possessed, a degree of faith and knowledge of their master. All three were to be empowered by that faith relationship to engage his Word in the world. Though all had the knowledge of their master and his graciousness, only two of them acted upon their faith to go into the world with the *Lord's Word*. Their faith relationship with the master led them to engage with the world around them. Our faith relationship with the Lord should empower us to go out and engage God's Word effectively with the world.

The focus is on a faith relationship with the master that leads to risk-taking. . . . Only [a faith relationship with our Lord] will move us to openly share His Word.

The critique on missions, therefore, is not based on the use of our gifts, rather a faith relationship with the Lord. Only this will move us to openly share His Word and allow for His growth across diverse cultural worldviews. To do this effectively, we need to understand the dynamics of cultural communication and allow that the Holy Spirit's power and authority in the Word grow within the cultural worldview of the people.

As a former missionary who has had to take this risk, it should not surprise us that, as the word of God goes out and engages people of other cultures, the living out of that faith, the confessional formulations, the worship structures, *et al.*, will and should utilize words and objects (signs) that communicate within that culture. For the missionary, these may not carry the same form, but nonetheless retain the same Gospel meaning. How do we keep it in check? How can we control it? We can't; that is the Holy Spirit's work through God's scattered Word as faith is worked and lived out in that culture.

Part I: Our Synod-wide Problem in a Nutshell

Our Synod is experiencing drops in attendance and membership. It is not sufficient simply to ask if we might be *hiding* God's Word, but rather to ask *how* or *why* we might be doing so. We rightfully and truthfully say, "Go, preach the Gospel." I believe that every Lutheran means this with all faithfulness to the teaching of Christ. However, how do I go and preach? Am I engaging the Gospel in the world in an intelligible way, or is it being buried under a cultural worldview? If I am preaching in German to a people who understand French, what do I expect to happen? If I insist that non-Western cultures¹² develop worship in a way that is not communicated through their cultural worldview, is the Word being engaged among the people of that culture? Would we not want the rich heritage and joyful sound expressed in our cultural worldview to find expression in such a way that it can work to *win over* people according to their ability, according to their cultural worldview? Is our faith strong enough to take the risk and simply scatter God's Word?

Am I engaging the Gospel in the world in an intelligible way, or is it being buried under a cultural worldview? . . . The task, however, is difficult and risky because we feel more secure when we take charge of communicating that message.

The task, however, is difficult and risky because we feel more secure when we take charge of communicating that message through words and objects that hold meaning within our own cultural worldview. It is easier and less *risky* to assume we are maintaining the purity of God's Word as we have expressed it in our lives, in our confessional formulations, and our worship structure, because these forms, words and objects (signs) have meaning for us. Are we keeping a one-world culturally meaningful expression of orthopraxis and orthodoxy?

In reality, however, this *hides* the Word. This is to *bury it*, from which Greek word we get the English word *crypt*. Our security needs to be in our ongoing faith relationship with a living and active Word that engages people of all cultures in a

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faith relationship with Him, not in our reluctance to accept culturally diverse expressions of that faith for fear of losing the purity of the Word. This word will give birth to expressions of faith in a diversity of cultures that will be able to communicate competently to their own. Again, are we willing to take the risk?

This, then, is the church in mission: to scatter God's Word (Is 55:11).¹³ It will engage with the culture of people in their daily lives. As a Synod, in faith, we must take the risk to scatter His Word, knowing that He is totally in control. In faith, we allow the Spirit to work on the hearts of men and women who will express it in a form that has meaning for them. In worship and daily living, in church structure and congregational organization, we should give thanks for cultural differences so that every believer cultivates this faith and see himself as one sent. All believers should own it, taste it, and feel it. It should speak their heartfelt language and enter into Law and Gospel interaction with their cultural values. It should convict of sin from within their cultural worldview. It should liberate from sin and death in culturally intelligible and effective ways as they know it. This alone unleashes the power of the Gospel, which is understood by them, expressed through them and lived out in cultural diversity.

Take the risk to scatter
His Word, knowing that
He is totally in control.
. . . We should give thanks
for cultural differences

Part II: Opting Out of Our Present Model of Missions and Outreach

Keeping this parable linked with our *financial* cultural category stifles us from taking a *risk*. It is common in synodical planning as well as congregational outreach. It is a traditional Western/capitalist cultural model. When we think finances, most churches, and Synod as well, strategize and plan on the basis of a budget. We approve plan funding based on potential outcome: *gains*.

And, when we think of the financial aspects of a strategy and planning, we naturally think of another aspect of Western/capitalist worldview: cost over length of time. We may consider time to be wasted if there is no quantifiable production, i.e., *gains*. We don't want a strategy or plan that wastes our time and our money. We rarely, if at all, consider entering into a project without determining the financial risk or the feasibility of our financial abilities, as well as the time that it will take to accomplish the goal. And, finally, to achieve the goal, we select the people with the best *abilities* (talents) to accomplish the task. In our Western/capitalist cultural worldview, our *modus operandi* is to limit our risks on our investment in order to reach the projected outcome.

As a result, we historically have chosen pastors and missionaries as part of the goal or strategy to accomplish the goals. Offerings enable the structured strategy and

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plan to be operational. Funding comes in as the gains are lauded and progress is reported. But our cultural worldview puts us in a “catch 22” situation interpreting our *abilities* financially and our *talents*, as *spiritual gifts*. This interpretation brings a point of tension and guilt for the self-conscious Christian because we know that the growth is the Lord’s and we are not guaranteed a calculable return.

If we try to see a missiological significance from the narrative in this way, it will lead us to a works-righteous interpretation of the parable. It leads us to conclude that the stewardship of our *talents* is the possible reason by which success or failure of the growth is determined. The supposed failure of a strategy to produce then leads to a frustrating conclusion, “We try our best, but it is the Lord who gives growth, and so I will use my gifts whenever I am able, but He has to cause growth wherever and whenever He chooses.”

The problem is that mission today is budget-driven and talent-driven. This model relies on money and personal financial stewardship to achieve business-like returns. This is a cultural Western/capitalist model of stewardship taken from our cultural influence on and interpretation of the Matthew parable. However, as we learn from this parable, stewardship is not financial. Stewardship is the cultivation of a lifestyle in a faith relationship with the Lord. According to the parable, we are not the owner of the *talents* as our possession; everything belongs to the Lord. Our life belongs to the Lord, our employment, family, children, everything. We are called to be stewards of God’s Word in our daily life. All things are given to us to be utilized as we are sent out into the world every day. As His *servants*, we engage His Word with everyone around us. And, we do this at all cost of self and our possessions on loan from Him. Daily, we are risking job, friends, ridicule, etc., while living in the gracious fellowship and faith relationship with our Lord.

Stewardship is the cultivation of a lifestyle in a faith relationship with the Lord.

This, then, is the faith we *possess* (ὕπαρχοντα, BDAG), that His Word has been *entrusted* (Παρέδωκεν, BDAG) to all Christians, that we should be confident to take risks of loss, because our relationship is with a gracious and loving God who abundantly provides and abundantly forgives. He made us *able* (Δύναμιν, BDAG), through His choosing, to put His *Word* (Τάλαντα, BDAG) to *work* (ἠργάσατο, BDAG) that some might be *won over* (ἐκέρδησα, BDAG) and that we may enter into His *joy* (χαρὰν, BDAG) and have fellowship with Him.

Endnotes

¹ I define and use *culture* as that ongoing process of socialization among people through a developing communication system that allows for the sharing of experiences in the world, through which meaning of the world around them is constructed. Experiences have meaning and are communicated through the use of *signs* (words, objects, sounds, etc.) which over time acquire agreed upon a shared *referent* (meaning). An understanding of these *signs* in relations to their *referent* is necessary for effective communication to take place. Anyone outside the system (the outsider) cannot share the meaning of the experience because they do not know the proper sign-referent codification. This is precisely the problem of reading the biblical text: the storyteller creates meaning by wisely choosing signs that are recognizable to the readers from shared experience, and have meaning in their daily lives. We are the outsiders to the New Testament world.

² Worldviews are like *lenses* through which the world is seen according to core values held in common by persons of a culture. These core values are constructed as part of ongoing socialization occurs, described in the first footnote.

³ Herein is the importance of semiotics, the study of communication in which anything that holds meaning in my culture is a *sign*. The *sign* has value only because it serves as a *referent* to something that holds meaning in my community. Beyond that, a sign can *signify* a concept or idea from my real world.

⁴ All Scripture quotations in this article are from *NET Bible*, Full Notes Net Bible, 2nd ed. (Richardson, TX: Biblical Studies Foundation, 2018).

⁵ In the study of semiotics a *category* is a *domain of meaning* in which words function as a group of *signs* that altogether serve as *referents* in a network of meaning. The group of words (*signs*) is used together to create meaning when talking *finances*.

⁶ Walter Bauer, Frederick W. Danker, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

⁷ Textual versus interpretive observation has to do with observations that are actually in the text. Interpretive observations are binary oppositions of my view of the interpretation of the parable.

⁸ “If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have *gained* your brother.”

⁹ “In the same way, wives, be subject to your own husbands. Then, even if some are disobedient to the word, they will be won over without a word by the way you live. . .”

¹⁰ “For since I am free from all I can make myself a slave to all, in order to gain even more people. To the Jews I became like a Jew to gain the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law) to gain those under the law. To those free from the law I became like one free from the law (though I am not free from God’s law but under the law of Christ) to gain those free from the law. To the weak I became weak in order to gain the weak. I have become all things to all people, so that by all means I may save some.”

¹¹ This strikes an eschatological chord with 1 Corinthians 6:3, where Paul says that Christians will “judge even angels.”

¹² And, by culture here I also refer to age groups and generational differences as distinct cultural groups.

¹³ “So shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.”