Remember Goofus and Gallant from Highlights magazine. They are still part of Highlights and have been since 1948.

Let’s borrow Goofus and Gallant this morning to think about our lessons.

Goofus is given $50. One of his friends really needs money because his parents are out of work. Goofus goes to his needy friend and says, Friend, I’ll lend you $50 this week so you and your family can eat now. Then next week, when the unemployment check comes, you can pay me back $50 plus $50 interest. The friend is desperate, so he takes the deal. Goofus is pleased with himself because he has made a 100 percent return on his investment, and all his friends praise him, too.

Gallant is given $10. Even though Gallant really wanted to use the money for video games, he knows things are tough for his friend, whose parents are out of work. He gives the $10 to his friend. Even though he knows the $10 won’t buy much food, he knows the gesture, at least, will encourage his friend. Gallant’s other friends laugh at him for giving up his money. Giving such a small amount of money to a friend who has significant needs is just like burying the money in the sand, they say. Better to have at least put the money in the bank and earned interest for himself, the friends tell him.

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For most of my life, I’ve thought of this parable of Jesus as being about how important it is for us to take the gifts God has given us and use them for God’s purposes. That is one way to interpret this parable and, no question about it, the call to use the gifts for God is real.

But when we look at the parable from the eyes of the Jewish people of Jesus’s day, another interpretation emerges – one that also fits with the theme of encouraging one another in the Thessalonians passage.

Bruce Malina was a Biblical scholar known for applying a social science lens to interpret the Bible. Richard Rohrbaugh is a professor of religious studies in Portland, Oregon. They’ve written a series of commentaries looking at the Bible as the people of its day would have viewed it.

They tell us that in the context of the Mediterranean world at the time, the hero of the Gospel story is the one who buried the talent rather than trading with it. From the perspective of the culture of Jesus’s day, resources were limited and had already been distributed. So, a drastic increase in what one person had meant a drastic decrease for someone else. To them, people who took what they were given and immediately doubled its value were thieves because they had to have gained themselves at the unfair expense of someone else. The third slave in the story refused to participate in taking from another, so he was considered the moral one.

We read the parable of the talents frequently in our tradition because it appears in both Luke’s Gospel and Matthew’s. The context of the parable, however, is different in Gospel. A key theme throughout the last part of the Gospel of Matthew is how we are to behave in the final days – the days before Jesus returns to claim his kingdom. Matthew is telling his audience essentially the same message that Paul tells his audience in Thessalonians. As the final days approach, you should not be greedy or self-centered, but rather encourage each other and help each other.

Now, this doesn’t mean that earning a living is bad. It doesn’t mean that owning a profitable business or investing well in the stock market is bad. If done in the right spirit, all these things are useful because they contribute to a healthy economy and generate opportunities for others. They also provide us with money we can share with others.

But, when I look carefully at this passage, I realize that the first two slaves doubled their money almost immediately. I can’t think of too many legitimate ways that can be done consistently. Occasionally, a day-trader might do this, but probably not consistently two times in a row. This makes me think of pay-day lenders or lenders who talk unknowing people into mortgages they can’t possibly pay and then foreclose on their homes. Or other people who prey on the misfortunes or mistakes of others to have more for themselves.

Now, none of us is an unscrupulous lender. But, perhaps we do sometimes take advantage of others. Often, we don’t realize what we’re doing because we are self-absorbed. We want a hot toy for our grandchild, so we almost knock others down to get to the store first. We are playing football and want to look good for the college recruiters, so we tackle the other person so hard that we break his leg.

Or we want that promotion at work, so we stick our competitor with a thankless project that has little chance of success while nabbing the plum one for ourselves. We are doing well and know we should help our struggling neighbor, but some of their struggles are from bad decisions. We feel we shouldn’t reward their bad choices, but rather reward ourselves with something we want because we’ve made better decisions. Or we see that society’s rules sometimes create an unlevel playing field for some people, but we do nothing to level that field. Or we see that a company engages in unscrupulous practices, but we patronize them anyway, or, perhaps, even work for them.

Instead, however, we are called to encourage each other and not participate in schemes that take advantage of others. Even if our neighbor has made mistakes, we help them get on their feet and turn their life around. We build each other up. We encourage others. We are children of God. That means we are called to walk as a child of the light. We are called to be like Jesus.