

A Parable About Fear and Joy

November 16, 2014

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SECOND COMING CONTEXT

Believe it or not Advent is just a few Sundays away. Advent, you'll remember is not just about the first coming of Jesus but also about the second coming. And today's lesson gives us a preview of that Advent message about the second coming.

Before we can read this passage with understanding, we need to note the literary context of this passage.

We are nearing the end of Matthew's gospel. It has become apparent that the religious and political leaders will not tolerate the ministry of Jesus much longer. The disciples of Jesus will need to know how to survive without Jesus.

On the Mount of Olives worried disciples ask Jesus in private, "Tell us, when will these things happen? And what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?" (Matthew 24:3)

Today's parable is one of many teachings and parables on the second coming of Jesus that occur in the 24th and 25th chapters of Matthew. The issue in this parable is NOT primarily a matter of stewardship. Most sermons you have heard on this passage (including some I have preached) have it wrong!

This parable is about faithfulness in a time of waiting. The disciples' faith will be tested in the days ahead. How can they keep the faith when the Master is away?

And this parable also asks us the same question. What does faithfulness look like in our time of waiting?

Hear God's Word as we find it in Matthew 25:14-30.

Matthew 25:14-30

14 "For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; 15 to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away.

16 The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. 17 In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. 18 But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money.

19 After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. 20 Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, 'Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents.' 21 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.' 22 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.' 23 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.'

24 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; 25 so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.'

26 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? 27 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.

28 So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. 29 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. 30 As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'

WHO IS THE LANDOWNER?

There's a great debate about the interpretation of our lesson for today. Does the landowner in our parable represent God?

If the landowner does represent God, then Jesus is urging the disciples not to just sit back and wait for the kingdom to come. Instead, they are to have an active faith. They are to take risks for the sake of the Gospel.

But, there's a problem with this way of understanding the parable. In many ways the landowner doesn't seem like a very good candidate to serve as an allegorical stand in for God. His dubious work ethic seems to be "you do all the work and I'll take all the profit."

His cold hearted and violent response to the one talent servant seems excessive. A case could be made that the one talent servant was just taking the prudent financial course in an uncertain time.

After all how many of us just a few years ago would have been better off burying our money in the backyard rather than losing lots of value in the stock market?

As I reread this very familiar passage with this question in mind I noticed something very important. The one talent servant's actions were deeply affected by his perception of the landowner.

There is no clue at the beginning of the passage about the character of the landowner. We just know that he goes away for a long time and he trusts his servants with a whole lot of money.

(According to one commentator, even one talent was equal to 20 years wages for a common laborer. The landowner put a lot of faith in these three servants.)

But, the one talent servant does not see being entrusted with this large sum of money as a sign of trust. He sees it as a burden. This third servant worries about losing the talent, and I imagine that he is quite happy to be relieved of this responsibility when the landowner returns.

And it is this third servant who first questions the character of the landowner. He tells the landowner who has returned, "Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you do not scatter seed."

SELF-FULFILLING PROPHECY

The other two servants didn't think of the landowner in this way. Their experience of the landowner is characterized by joy and fulfillment.

Why was the third servant's view of the landowner so different? It's a matter of perception.

Carefully notice the response of the landowner to this accusation. He doesn't confirm nor deny the accusation of the third servant. Instead, he asks a telling question,

“If you thought I was so awful, then why didn't you choose another strategy?”

The landowner's eventual harsh response to the third servant seems to be a case of self-fulfilling prophecy. He decides to act in the way that the third servant characterizes him. The third servant's fear becomes a reality.

The third servant is left out in the cold because he does not trust the landowner, even though the landowner trusted him with much of his wealth.

I wonder.

Could a wrongheaded view of God hinder our ability to serve God effectively?

I think so.

Many imagine God primarily as an enforcer of rules. And that causes us to get hung up on legalism instead of true faith. We act like God is a harsh taskmaster and is out to get us. We believe that everything bad in our lives is a punishment from God.

That belief becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. We experience what we believe. God becomes for us a very fickle and unsympathetic God.

I've found this to be true of people inside and outside the church, but this is often true of those who used to attend church but now don't. Somewhere along the line these non-attenders were given a picture of God that was fearful and harsh, and that's why they don't want to attend church or even think about God much.

Can you blame them? If I thought God was a harsh taskmaster, I might not want to be around Him either?

On the other hand, if we believe that God is gracious, we see signs of that grace all around us. If we think that God is love, we see signs of that love in our own lives and find it easier to share that love with others.

The grace that God has given us in Jesus Christ is multiplied by love.

Five talents become ten.
Two talents become four.
And joy overcomes fear.

All this happens because we have a different view of the Master.

What we see is often what we get.

OUR PICTURE OF GOD

What picture of God do you carry around inside of you? Do you picture a God who is stern, judgmental, and prone to violence? Or do you picture a God who is gracious, loving and eager for peace?

Many of us talk about the grace of God and God's forgiveness. But, it has been my experience that we often say one thing and do another.

An ungracious lifestyle belies a different view of God. Instead of trusting in the grace and forgiveness of God we trust only in what we can do. We think that it is better to try and keep what we have, to bury our talent and our lives in the back yard.

The basis of all sin is described in the story of Adam and Eve. What was this original sin? It was this: they did not trust the goodness of God.

Adam and Eve were willing to believe the lie that God was holding out on them. God didn't want them to have the forbidden fruit because the fruit would allow them to become like gods.

And this mistrust and fear brought death and separation into their lives.

What we really believe about God will come out in our actions. If we believe that God has graciously given us life and hope, we will be willing to take risks in His name. We are playing with house money so to speak. We serve not out of compulsion but out of gratitude.

But, if we are afraid of God, if we think that God is a harsh taskmaster, we will not take risks in His name. Indeed our whole life will be constricted by fear.

And unfortunately, fear becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

We experience what we fear. We become what we fear. What we love is taken away, and we find ourselves in the outer darkness.

OVERCOMING A FAULTY VIEW OF GOD

It takes a long time to get over a faulty view of God. “Religious” people who are very judgmental and unforgiving often reinforce this negative perception of God.

Many people in our world today use religion to promote fear and intolerance instead of love and justice. It’s no wonder that many people think that religion is the problem instead of the answer.

Maybe some of you have experienced this negative form of religion in your life and struggle to overcome it. I’ve found that it helps to talk about it.

Sometimes when we bring these faulty images of God out into the open, they lose their power to make us afraid, and the joy of the Lord is restored.

So, let’s be in conversation about this. Let’s talk about the Master that we serve and the wealth of the gospel. What are the implications of grace? How can grace bring us joy instead of fear?

THE TALENT OF THE GOSPEL

So the Master or the Landowner in this parable represents God. But, what do the talents represent in this allegorical parable? I believe the talents represent the gospel. We have been entrusted with the talent, the treasure of the gospel.

And what we do or don’t do with the gospel makes all the difference.

This parable is not a gentle tale about what Christians do with their individual gifts and talents.

This is a disturbing story about what Christians do or do not do with the gospel as they wait for the coming of the kingdom of heaven. The gospel is the real treasure, and all of us have been entrusted with this treasure.

We are all (as the apostle Paul put it in his letter to the Corinthians) “stewards of God’s mysteries.” The character of God has been revealed to us in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. And as stewards of this great mystery, we must

be faithful and trustworthy. We must proclaim the grace of God that it might be multiplied.

I would remind you once again of the context of this parable.

Jesus tells this parable just a few days before he gives his life on the cross. He gives his life as a sign of God's grace. The cross is a symbol of how far God will go to communicate His love for us and for the whole world.

Jesus spent his life talking about God's love for the world. Jesus fed the hungry, healed the sick, and offered forgiveness. He welcomed all who recognized their need into the loving embrace of God.

And for that He is crucified.

God's Son stretched out his arms on the cross and told the world, "This is how much I love you. I am willing to give everything, even my own life in order to for you to see God's love and grace."

And just in case we missed that message, God raises Jesus on the third day so that we might know that His love is stronger than hate. His joy is greater than fear.

EARLY ADVENT

Advent is coming soon. And after Advent comes Christmas with its tidings of great joy.

And just as the secular world can't wait to begin the commercial season, we in the church can't wait to begin the sacred season. The Master calls us to multiply the talent and enter his joy.

What did the angels say? Fear not for I bring you good tidings of great joy.

Once again we enter the season where the battle between fear and joy is once again joined. Who do we believe is coming, the Master of joy or the Master of fear?

How we answer that question makes all the difference. The light that shines in the darkness is none other than the light of salvation.

The treasure of the gospel is like no other treasure. The only way we can lose it is by trying to keep it to ourselves, by burying it in the back yard of our life. The only way we can lose it is trying too much to keep it.

LET THE LIGHT SHINE

A man was crossing a rough mountain in Wales on a stormy night. As the moon shone dimly through the clouds, he thought he could make his way without the lantern, so he put the lantern under his coat to protect his hands from the biting wind.

Suddenly, a gust of wind blew open his coat, and as the light shone forth it revealed the edge of a large quarry. If he had gone one more step, he would have fallen to his death.

Never again did he hide his lantern inside his cloak.

It is dangerous to hid our light under a bushel or bury our treasure in the back yard. God doesn't want us to hide the treasure He has given us. God wants us to use that treasure to glorify Him and illuminate our life's path.

The Bible tells us, "God did not give us a spirit of timidity but a spirit of power, of love and of self-control."

The Bible also tells us that perfect love casts out fear. The antidote to fear is not violence or playing it safe. The antidote to fear is the love of God as revealed in Jesus Christ.

In the parable the servant doubted the character of his master. He thought that he was a hard man. And that did seem to be the case in the end.

But, our Master is not hard. Our Lord is gracious. In his perfect love fear can be cast out and we can dare to live with courage and faith.

Amen.