

Matthew 25:14-30
Accountability
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St. Mary the Virgin
Proper 28
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Jesus said, “The Kingdom of heaven will be as when a man going on a journey called his servants and entrusted to them his property; to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. He who had received the five talents went at once and traded with them; and he made five talents more. So also, he who had the two talents made two talents more. But he who had received the one talent went and dug in the ground and hid his master’s money. Now after a long time the master of those servants came and settled accounts with them. And he who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five talents more, saying, ‘Master, you delivered to me five talents; here I have made five talents more.’ His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a little, I will set you over much; enter into the joy of your master.’ And he also who had the two talents came forward, saying, ‘Master, you delivered to me two talents; here I have made two talents more.’ His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a little, I will set you over much; enter into the joy of your master.’ He also who had received the one talent came forward, saying, ‘Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not winnow; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.’ But his master answered him, ‘You wicked and slothful servant! You knew that I reap where I have not sowed, and gather where I have not winnowed? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and at my coming I should have received what was my own with interest. So take the talent from him, and give it to him who has the ten talents.’ For to every one who has will more be given, and he will have abundance; but from him who has not, even what he has will be taken away. And cast the worthless servant into the outer darkness; there men will weep and gnash their teeth.’ ”

This is a troubling Gospel passage. From time-to-time when people talk to me about how judgmental the OT is when compared to the NT I will respond that the NT is much harsher than the OT. This is one of those passages. The Master says to the servant who buried his money:

‘You wicked and slothful servant! You knew that I reap where I have not sowed, and gather where I have not winnowed? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and at my coming I should have received what was my own with interest. So take the talent from him, and give it to him who has the ten talents.’ For to every one who has will more be given, and he will have abundance; but from him who

has not, even what he has will be taken away. And cast the worthless servant into the outer darkness; there men will weep and gnash their teeth.’ ”

That is harsh.

In the study of Revelation I am leading, and which I would be honored for you to join in person or streaming on Zoom, I ask us to look at images. This story gives us images in a variety of ways. We gain insight when we entertain new and diverse ways to imagine the story and not see anything as an absolute equivalency. Can this story have multiple meanings and are any of them important to you and me?

So let's look at this story.

Scholars suggest that to get a feel for what's involved we drop the word Talents, however accurate a translation it might be, and substitute Bags of Gold. The point is that the Master didn't give the servants¹ trivial amounts of money, each was given a significant amount to invest. We are talking about real capital investments.

Sometimes when we read these stories we over-identify the characters mentioned with Jesus, or the disciples or Pharisees or some other person or group. This is difficult in this story. We know of Jesus that he did not seek or accept wealth. We know of Jesus that he did not seek or accept authority. We know of Jesus that he preached radical forgiveness and acceptance and that he cared especially for the poor and powerless. In this story Jesus cannot be the Master. Jesus cannot be made to condemn the least skilled for a lack of skill or financial acumen. Jesus doesn't urge us to invest in property, the stock market or any other money making scheme. Jesus is never understood as harsh and demanding.

So why would Matthew put this story in this series of judgment passages talking about the end-time? Why would he confuse us, if he did put it here intentionally, by having Jesus seem so harsh and unforgiving? Judgment is even clearer in next week's Gospel in which we are reminded that we find our Lord by feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, clothing the naked and visiting the sick and those in prison. We continue the theme from last week this morning and we complete this series next week. We have consecutive weeks on judgment.

What do we do with this series and especially this story?

If we step back and look at the people to whom this story was addressed, and I don't mean those who heard it from Jesus, assuming he's the source of the story, but the congregation Matthew is encouraging to survive and grow, what do we find?

Is it enough to be Christian, to tithe, a wonderful attribute to have, to worship regularly, a meaningful discipline to practice and to observe the Golden Rule, a great guide to life, or is more expected of us if we are to be Christian and enjoy the benefits of the Christian life?

You can see where I'm going I hope. This example, as flawed as it is since Jesus cannot be the Master depicted in it, says that you and I have been given a gift, a meaningful and valuable gift. What do we intend to do with it?

Do we hoard it to ourselves and practice our Christianity as a personal religion from which we may get some comfort but which does nothing to change the world? Do we turn out back on the petition in the Lord's Prayer where we ask that our reality be the place where God's will is enacted on Earth as in Heaven? (Our Father in heaven,

¹ The word is actually *slaves* but to argue for it would distract us from my point.

hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven). When we pray this prayer we're asking for our world to be changed to be like heaven. Or, like the 3rd servant, do we leave the world as we found it and not work to bring in the kingdom despite the assurances we have received of our place in heaven? If so then, this story tells us, our Christianity is pointless. Christianity cannot be practiced in isolation. Of course the culture we live in tells us that indeed Christianity can only be practiced as an individual decision for Christ. But our culture is wrong. We live in a culture which worships power and we practice a faith that disdains it. Which rules us?

The fearful servant was afraid to act. No one benefited from his fear. In judging him I maintain that the master is simply saying to him, you will live the consequences of your fear.

The other two servants, each of different ability, took the gift and expanded it. They were rewarded with blessings. I believe this very troubling story is intended to give us the confidence to go out and live our Christianity in a way that reveals to the world the security, purpose and wealth that faith in Christ Jesus provides. These are the riches Matthew wanted his congregation to seek and he urged them to go out and live a Christian life in the world to bring others to Christ and not to live a fearful life afraid to act.

I recognize that this story on its surface is a harsh judgment on an untalented servant. But if you'll accept that it's a story, Jesus is not the Master, it's just a story, then the point is more consistent with what the Gospel proclaims. We experience the love of the Gospel, the peace of our Lord, only when we invest it in God's creation, the world around us. That is the way to be certain we don't bring down upon ourselves the punishment pronounced over the third servant.

In other words this is not a story about how to get to Heaven. It's a story about how to make this world more like Heaven.