

Where There Will be Weeping and Gnashing of Teeth

Today we finish the series on the Parable of the Talents. It seems appropriate to end a sermon series at the same place the parable ends:

(MATTHEW 25:28-30 NIV) *"So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. ²⁹For 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. ³⁰As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.*

You were hoping I'd skip that part—right? It's a difficult subject: judgment; accountability. Even when caught red-handed, virtually no one considers himself deserving of judgment and punishment. "If you only understood..." I'm really not at fault. It was an accident. I'm a victim. // Remember Flip Wilson's alter-ego, "Geraldine"? and her famous comeback, "The devil made me do it."

That's a real rationalization for many Christians—a way by which folks try to avoid accountability. In the middle ages the church said sins committed inadvertently would not be held against one in eternity. If "the devil made me do it," how can I be held accountable? It's as old as Adam: *he* blamed *God*: "The woman you put here with me—she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate it."

It's difficult; most of us would prefer avoiding the subject. But if we deal in any depth with Jesus' "Parable of the Talents," it's unavoidable:

"You wicked, lazy servant! ... Take the talent from him and give it to the one who has the ten talents... And throw this worthless servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." (MATTHEW 25:26-30 NIV)

That's pretty stiff accountability! And it sounds familiar: a lot like what's usually called "hell." I hesitate to get specific with descriptions, because the New Testament has many names and descriptions: it's like the fires of Gehenna, a gully outside the south wall of Jerusalem where the garbage was burned; and most commonly hell is linked with fire—and suffering. Sometimes it's called "hell"; sometimes it's called "the kingdom of this world", sometimes "the kingdom of darkness", the "place of eternal punishment," "a place with the hypocrites, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. In today's parable it's called "outside", and is described as "dark", with "weeping and gnashing of teeth".

The critical point of *this* parable is this: there *will* be an accounting. And the critical question is, "Why was the one-talent servant banished from the master's household?" More directly: on what basis might *we* be banished?

Several years ago the Pope visited Denver. In the week before the Pope's arrival, a Cardinal made headlines with a statement that Vice President Gore was "in danger of the fires of hell" because of his stand on abortion. Strong statement! Is it true? What condemns a person to hell? In my understanding of Christian faith our destination for heaven or hell is not dependent upon our stance in regard to moral issues; nor the correctness of our doctrine. Whether we're destined for heaven or hell is determined totally by the grace of God, and based completely upon our faith in Jesus Christ.

But in the history of the church there've always been those who've tried to

reduce faith to the lowest common denominator—a simple equation—a checklist by which, with the least possible effort and risk, we can regulate behavior and life so as to be assured of heaven and avoid hell. Too many church members don't really want a "living faith;" they just want "fire insurance"—a guarantee, and at the cheapest rate: "what's the least I have to do?"

It was into that kind of situation Jesus moved as he began his ministry. It was the duty of the Jewish Scribes to interpret the law; and they took their jobs very seriously. They spent their days stooped over parchment, shoulders aching, eyes burning from constant work under the dim light of smoky oil lamps, filling scroll after scroll with commentary about the law.

Take, for example, the command, "Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work." Several volumes are dedicated exclusively to the question, "What is work?" What activities must be avoided on the Sabbath?

"Carrying a cup of honey more than six steps" is work. Why six steps? Who knows? So Jewish women would set the Sabbath table on Friday. There is a case on record in which a man was stoned to death for dragging a chair across the dirt floor of his home. They said he was *plowing on the Sabbath!* He was stoned to death!

Oh, they had it down pat. Here's the formula: do this and this and that; and don't do this and this and that. And then Jesus jumped right in the middle of their neatly-constructed house of cards.

He said, a landowner went out to hire workers for his vineyard. He went at 6:00 a.m., again at 9:00 a.m., at noon and at 5:00 p.m. At six o'clock he paid them all the same. Those who worked twelve hours grumbled: "They got as much for one hour's work as we got for twelve." But, you see, rewards in the "Kingdom" are not based on what, or how much one does; or on any comparison to some standard of morality, or to the behavior of other persons. Each person stands alone: accountable.

In the "Parable of the Talents", the "one-talent" servant wasn't banished from his master's house because of evil or dishonest behavior. In fact, there is in this one-talent man a *deep* sense of honesty.

In his honesty *he took his responsibility very seriously*. He wouldn't risk losing his master's money or having its value reduced.

He's not dishonest. I wish my own kids had taken that much responsibility with my tools when they were growing up! Of course, there are different levels of responsibility: my kids usually took my tools without asking permission. The servant in the parable is "entrusted" with his master's property; and he's proud to say, "I didn't lose it!" He's not dishonest. *He's afraid.*

In FDR's 1933 inaugural address, he said, "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself." It's always fear that does a people in. That's why scripture insists: the opposite of love is not hate, but fear: "Perfect love casts out *fear*."

Love urges people to expose themselves to reality. But while love seeks truth, fear seeks safety, and safety lies in failure.

You see, what we most fear is not the evil in the world, nor the evil in ourselves. What we most fear is the *good* in ourselves, because to realize it would be just too demanding. Success demands commitment, and *with* success comes responsi-

bility; and among the things Americans fear most today are commitment and responsibility. I see it in my ministry: from pre-marital counseling to recruiting people to serve on committees of the church. It's easier to be guilty than to be responsible. Or, as our kids learn, it's easier to say, "I'm sorry" than to ask permission.

And so, like the one-talent man, most people today adopt what William Sloan Coffin calls a protective strategy of deliberate failure: you can't lose any money if you don't place any bets. You can't fall out of bed if you sleep on the floor.

And if you can feel that you're a victim of "fate" or other people, then you won't feel so badly about being a failure. And if you can convince yourself that the "Masters" in this world (i.e., the bankers and the federal reserve and the government) are pushing you around then you can bury your talent with good conscience.

John Wooden, the great coach at UCLA in the sixties when the Bruins dominated college basketball for a decade, said that as he looked over his new freshmen every fall, he looked for those who made the most mistakes on the court, because they were the ones who weren't afraid of failure. They were willing to try new things. He said, "The basketball player who never makes a mistake on the court will never get any better than he is right now."

The servant in the parable said, "I was afraid." The master responded, "You wicked and lazy servant!" And threw him out. What would you do if you weren't afraid?

He wasn't thrown out because he was dishonest or guilty of some crime or misconduct. He wasn't banished for not measuring up to the five-talent and the two-talent servants. And that's where we can hear the "Good News".

Accountability is unavoidable. But God does not hold us accountable to any set standard of excellence, except what God already has given us. In the parable the master said to the one-talent servant: "There was no expectation that you double your talent, just because they did. You don't have to be an investments genius, or a venture capitalist, or an entrepreneur; but anybody can open a savings account at a local bank! You weren't expected to duplicate what anybody else did, but you did nothing with what you had!"

The "Good News" is that God has "gifted" each of us—entrusted us with abilities to fulfill individual roles in God's plan for the ages. Soon after Labor Day we're going to redo the Spiritual Gifts inventory we did six years ago. It was valid; but, there was no follow-up. Understand: our assessment of Spiritual Gifts is not to be used by church leadership to discover how we can put you to work; rather, it will be a tool to help each of us discover our identity and calling in Christ, and to guide us as we live out a New Testament vision for mutual work, support and encouragement. And Ephesians 4:1-16 is the clearest articulation of that vision I know. I challenge you to read it—daily.

And God expects nothing beyond those abilities that already have been given. We don't have to duplicate anybody else's personal experience or ministry; we are accountable only for being ourselves: living out our true identity as "gifted" children of God.

When we do, we don't have to wait for the master's return. *In those moments* we already participate in the "Kingdom of God;" *in those moments* we already share our master's happiness.