

The God We Think We Know

Matthew 25:14-30

The Parable of the Talents was never exactly one of my favorites. The way that my eyes glaze over at the sight of a spreadsheet reminds me that my management of the master's portfolio might have been no better handled than that of the unfortunate slave in this story. So, it follows that my fate would also have matched his.

The parable tells the story of a master who entrusts three slaves with varying shares of his wealth, for them to manage while he is away. Upon his return, he is delighted to find that the two slaves who were entrusted with the greater amounts of property had invested wisely, and one might assume—boldly. Each of them doubled the value of what they were given. As a result, they are rewarded with an invitation to enter into the joy of their master. But when the third slave steps forward he is still brushing the dirt off the burlap bag he used to bury the master's treasure in the ground. He returns exactly what he was entrusted with—no more, no less.

The justification he offers for playing it safe with his master's cash is based on what he *thought he knew* about him. "Master, I *knew* that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; so I was *afraid*, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.' This servant has firmly convinced himself that he knows his master's character and knows what to expect when it comes to displeasing him. His investment strategy is dictated by his *fear* of failure and punishment. And yet, everything that we can know about the master based on what is revealed to us in the parable tells a different story.

When we hear the word "talent" in this parable, we might think of shows like "America's Got Talent" where talents such as singing, dancing and doing magic tricks are showcased and judged. But the talents referred to in the parable actually apply to measurements of gold or silver. When Jesus lived, a talent was an amount of money approximately equal to what the average blue-collar worker would take fifteen years to earn! So, the five talents received by the first slave was more than enough to be set for life; and even the two talents entrusted to the second slave, and the single talent given to the third slave represented enormous amounts of money.

The faith the master places in these three servants demonstrates an abundance of trust in them. He doesn't tell them how to invest the money, but trusts their instincts and actions to bear fruit. It's almost as though what matters most to the master was not a profitable return on his investments to make himself even wealthier, but an investment in the slaves themselves.

What if the master's motive for giving the slaves responsibility for managing his wealth was not selfish, at all? What if he wanted to let them experience his faith in them? And to experience firsthand the joy that comes with being generous with what they have received?

That would explain the master's not keeping for himself the dividends they gained, but returning it to them to continue investing. It would also make sense of what it meant for the first two slaves' reward being an invitation for them to enter into the joy of their master. That doesn't sound like the picture of a greedy robber baron that the third slave imagined the master to be.

Maybe, what makes this parable so confusing is that we assume the third slave's estimation of the Master's miserliness to be accurate when it really does not reflect the man's true character. If that's the case, then the point of the parable becomes something much different than how to please a demanding God. The lesson of the parable for us then is, how might our distorted images of God create a barrier between us and the joyous life God wants us to enjoy. In the end, instead of participating in the master's joy, like the first two slaves, this guy is thrown into the outer darkness, where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. Whereas, the first two were promised more resources for future investments, what the third slave was given gets taken away, leaving him emptyhanded.

Sometimes, the God we think we know turns out to be the God we get. If we imagine God to be impossible to please and quick to punish when we don't make the grade, we are more likely to fear failure than to anticipate joy in serving such a Lord. And it's unlikely that we would venture boldly into the work this God calls us to do armed with expectations of discovering joy in our discipleship.

What's worse is that, not only does the God we think we know become the God we get; it most likely becomes the God we give to others. The severity we associate with the God we think we know does not easily translate into extravagant love toward our neighbors. Sooner or later, the God we think we know becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. There is no need for us to be cast into "the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" because that is the place our souls already call home; not as a judgment levied upon us by a wrathful master, but as a consequence of our misjudging God's true nature. Is it any wonder then, that we feel little enthusiasm for, and end up with very little to show for, the opportunities given us for investing in the advancement of God's kingdom on earth? But when the God we know is the God of grace made known to us in Jesus Christ, it shapes more than our expectations about God. It also alters the way we perceive our own potential, shifts the lens through which we view our purpose in life, and transforms the way we relate to others.

The Parable of the Talents doesn't reveal what opinion the first two slaves had of their master. All we can say is that their actions were 180° removed from that of their fellow servant. That the both of them are described as having gone off "at once" to make their investments suggests that they approached their mission with enthusiasm, rather than with dread. As if it were an opportunity rather than a test.

Getting our understanding of God straight makes all the difference in life between entering into the joy God intends for us to experience and the outer darkness of being controlled by fear of an angry God who doesn't exist except in our misplaced assumptions.

The Apostle Paul was trying to help the Thessalonian Church to get their thinking about God straight. He told them, "For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us."

That bears repeating.

You are not destined for wrath. Living in fear of a wrathful God is not what you were created for. Our destiny is to enter our Master's joy. That is what it means to obtain salvation. To prove how seriously God desires for us to know that, Jesus gave his life for us so as to remove any shadow of doubt. A God who allowed his only Son to give his life for us—to remove anything that stands between us and the eternal joy we are destined for—sounds to me like a God to be revered, but not to be feared.

When Moses asked for God's name, the answer he got was, "I am who I am." It wasn't "I am whoever you think I am." So, may the "God who is" take the place of the "God you think you know" when the "God you think you know" is really just a projection of your own fears.

As for me, I'm getting over the squeamishness I once felt about this parable. As the God I thought I knew growing up has been replaced with the God I recognize today in Jesus, and experience every day through the Holy Spirit, I've discovered that investing my life in God's purposes feels less risky all the time. I'm even finding that it generates dividends of joy that I am able to share with others.

My prayer is that, if you haven't already, you will discover that for yourselves, too.

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