

“What You See is What You Get”

Pastor Rich Knight
Trinitarian Congregational Church
May 4, 2014
Matthew 25:14-30

Matthew 24 & 25 are devoted to the Return of Christ. But what's interesting is that Jesus' point in these teachings is not simply for us to believe that one day the Kingdom of God will come to earth in all its glory. His point is about how we should live here and now if we believe that - if we believe that there really is a heaven and that one day heaven and earth will merge - how then shall we live?

Matthew 25:14-30

“For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money. After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. 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.' 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.' 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.' 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.' 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; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.' 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? 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. So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. 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. As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'”

If you've been in church for many years you've undoubtedly heard a number of sermons on this passage. Often during stewardship month.

In Jesus' parable a master is preparing to go on a trip. He calls his 3 servants together, and he gives them each a different amount of talents (a weight/amount of money) - one gets 5, 2, 1. The 3 servants received 3 different amounts of money. Jesus said the money was distributed according to their ability. A "talent" back then was worth a very large sum of money. (Footnote – some commentaries say 1 talent = 1 year's wages, others say as much as 15 years of wages) They each received plenty of money but different amounts.

One truth of the story is that God is not so much interested in how much talent we have, but rather in what we do with the talents God gave us!

It's not having talents that matter. It's how we use our God-giving abilities and resources that make the difference. Human beings are not equal in talent, but we can be equal in effort.

My best friend in seminary was the hardest-working student I'd ever seen. He would get up at 7 am every morning, shower & have breakfast and be sitting at his desk studying by 8 am. Who ever heard of that????? I once asked him why he worked so hard (I know, that's a really dumb question). He said it was because he didn't feel he was as smart as most of the other students, and so he had to work twice as hard to keep up and master the material. Now, who do you think learned more in school? - those of us who thought we were smart enough and gave a reasonable effort? - or James B. Miller, who didn't think he was terribly smart and outworked us all?

It's not the amount of talent we have that matters. It's what we do with that talent that matters - for our sakes and for God's sake. In the parable it's the servant who did nothing with his talent who get reprimanded and punished.

Another truth taught in this passage is that one day there will be an accounting of what we've done with what we've been given.

In Jesus' story, when the master returns and comes face to face with the servants, he wants to know what they've done with the talents they've been given. The master in the story of course represents Christ himself, and so Jesus is teaching that one day we will come face to face with him and with the question, "What did we do with what God gave us?" This is not a biblical doctrine that we talk about a lot. It seems to run contrary to grace (yet it doesn't – we're saved by grace and yet still accountable). This is clearly taught in the Bible. The next verses in Matt. 25 tell the parable of the sheep & the goats, where the King puts the sheep on his right and rewards them, and puts the goats on his left and punishes them. What's the difference between the sheep & the goats? - what they did for the poor! *"I was hungry and you gave me something to eat. I was naked & you clothed me. I was homeless & you took care of me."* Our deeds matter on that final day.

Romans. 14:10 - *“We will all stand before the judgment seat of God, and each of us will be accountable to God.”*

This is one of the themes of Rick Warren’s book, The Purpose Driven Life.

“Every act of our lives strikes some chord that will vibrate in eternity . . . At the end of your life on earth you will be evaluated and rewarded according to how well you handled what God entrusted to you.”

I wish that wasn’t the case, don’t you? But on the other hand it means that life matters! It’s clear in this parable - the Master comes back and wants to know, “What have you done with what I entrusted to you.” The one servant is called “wicked & lazy” and he is punished. The text says there was “gnashing” of teeth, which is basically, “Ahhhhhhh, I blew it!!!” But the other two took what they had been given and put it to use for the Master. At the Master’s return they are commended and rewarded - *“Well done, good and faithful servants. Enter into the joy of your Master.”*

Well, these are the primary teachings of this passage:

1. We each have different gifts, resources & talents. God is interested in the quality of our efforts, not the quantity of our talents.
2. We will have to give an account someday for what we did with what God gave us.

That’s probably enough for one day, but I’m a preacher and we never know when to stop. So let me share with you another truth found in this passage that is not a traditional teaching from it. The truth is this:

What You See is What You Get.

What You See is What You Get (to quote the late, great Flip Wilson).
What you see spiritually is often what you receive spiritually.

One of the hardest parts of the parable is the harshness of the Master towards the lazy servant who did nothing with his talent. But if you think about this principle - What You See is What You Get - it begins to make sense.

Vs. 24 - Then the one who received one talent also came forward, saying, *“Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not scatter seed, so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here it is.”* But his Master replied, *“You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? Then give me that coin back.”*
Basically - *“If that’s what you thought of me, then that’s how I’ll be for you.”*
What you see is what you get.

“You knew that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter?” - that’s what you thought of me?

Jesus is teaching us that what we see is what we get. How we envision God usually determines how we experience God. If we envision a harsh, punishing, vindictive God (like a very mean judge, policeman or principal) then that's how God will be for us. And so when something bad happens we see it as punishment from God. If we envision a distant, uninvolved God (The Clock Maker- God who creates the world and then just sits back and watches it go) then that's likely to determine our experience of God - distant and uninvolved. What you see is what you get.

On the other hand if you envision a God who cares for you, who loves you, who walks by your side, who speaks to you in many & various ways - through creation, through music, through the scriptures, through friends . . . if you can envision a God who loves you, you will see signs of his love.

This is why theology matters! This is why our doctrines matter. This is why we study the scriptures to get the clearest picture we can of God. And this is why God came to us in Jesus - to show us the face of God. What is God like? - God is like Jesus. Thank God. Because what you see is what you get. And we see God in Jesus.

This principle is true not just spiritually but also emotionally. I remember the first wedding I ever performed. It was 30 yrs. ago. I found out then and there that wedding receptions are not very relaxing for ministers (which is one of the reasons why I seldom go - the other reason is time). But the reason why receptions are not relaxing is that the family usually sits the minister with their family member who is most involved in their church (so we can talk about church all night!).

Well, at my first wedding reception as a minister, the Family Member Most Involved in Her Church was of course sitting next to me. The first things she said to me was, "Where did you go to seminary?" "Princeton," I replied. "A lot of nuts come out of Princeton Seminary," she replied. "Well, I guess you've just found another one!" Then she told me about her pastor in Ohio – Rev. Nutcase. Next, someone mentioned doctors. "My doctor is an idiot," she interjected. The subject of dentists came up. "My dentist is absolutely cruel," she said. We talked about our neighbors. "My next door neighbor is the most selfish person in the world!" On and on this went. It was the longest meal of my life. I came 'this close' to saying, "Ma'am, the problem in your life is not your Pastor, your Doctor, your Dentist, or your Neighbor. The problem in your life is you! You've got to change your attitude, your perspective!"

Because what you see is what you get!

If we go around thinking the worst of other people and judging them without mercy or grace, we can find fault everywhere and see a pretty miserable world. What you see is what you get.

From prison, Paul wrote these words to the Philippians: *“Beloved, whatever is true; whatever is honorable; whatever is just; whatever is pure; whatever is pleasing; whatever is commendable; if there is any excellence, and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things!”* (Phil. 4:8)

One of my favorite children’s messages is the dot on the piece of paper. I take a plain white sheet of paper and put a small dot on it. I then say to the children, “What is this?” “A dot,” they reply. “Is that all it is? It’s also a perfectly good piece of paper. You can draw a picture with it, maybe even use the dot in your picture. You could make a paper airplane out of this piece of paper. It’s a pretty good piece of paper, even though it has this little dot.”

Listen, you can spend your days focused on the dots, focused on everything that’s wrong with life or you can look for what is good, for what is right, for what is beautiful, for what is of God.

This week, may you have the eyes of faith

- to see life as God see it
- to see others as God sees them
- and to see yourself as God sees you, as a child of God.

Think about it. Let’s pray about it.

Lord Jesus,

Give us your vision for our lives. Make our faith a way of seeing life as you see it - from heaven’s perspective. Thank you for the promise of your return - that one day your justice and peace will reign upon this earth. Help us to prepare for that day by using the talents you’ve given us - in different ways, according to our gifts, but in harmony with one another and with you, the Lord of Life. In your name. Amen.

I received a few questions this week regarding the harshness in the parable. Is it Jesus speaking, as if that’s how God might talk to us? (“You wicked and lazy slave!”) No. Not every detail in a parable is meant to speak a spiritual truth. In this case, Jesus was telling a (fictional) story using language and details that folks of his day could relate to. Thanks for the questions. Keep ‘em coming.