

“Everybody Has a Talent”

Proverbs 3:1-12; Matthew 25:14-30

July 10, 2022

Ask any employee in an organization large enough to have them what their least favorite part of the job is and I guarantee you there will be one overwhelming answer – performance reviews. No matter how well we may be doing our jobs, there is just something profoundly hair-raising about having your work scrutinized. In fact, the thought of it alone may send some of us into conniptions. Yes, no one feels comfortable when their supervisors take out that sheet of paper and looks at the objective data from your job performance. It can be humbling, to be sure. I’ll never forget one time, feeling like I’d done the best job in the entire world going into a performance review only to discover my employer had a different take on my efforts. Not that they were disappointed, mind you, just they pointed out several areas for improvement that I hadn’t considered.

So, like I said, performance reviews are difficult things which is precisely why the 25 chapter of Matthew may not be our most favorite section of scripture. For within just one chapter, Jesus stacks three parables on top of each other. Each of which, in its own way, points us towards the reality of judgment, our ultimate performance evaluation. If the idea of judgment is frightening to you, I completely understand why. We almost never talk about it, at least not within many Protestant church walls. Oh, we favor justification by faith talk here far more. But both are true. Yes, we believe we are destined for heaven for no other reason that God has blessed us with faith in Jesus Christ. That’s justification by faith. Faith alone, sola fide as our spiritual forebears held high. But there is another side to the coin. Another statement must be made. If we truly believe in Jesus Christ, we will be found doing the very things he asks us to.

That’s why the first of the three parables in Matthew 25 deals with waiting in faith. Ten Virgins await a bridegroom but only five of them ensure there’s enough oil in their lamps so that when he arrives, they can celebrate. The other five, well, they’re not quite willing to put in the work. The parable concludes with five of the women inside and celebrating whilst the other five are left out in the cold, so to speak.

The next parable Jesus tells is our reading for today and, again, the emphasis falls on doing work. One day a very rich man summons his servants and tells them he’s going on a trip. While he’s away, the rich man provides each of the servants with a princely sum, entrusting that wealth to them entirely. He gives the first man 5 talents, the second man two talents and the third servant just one talent. Now, lest we think that any of these men was shortchanged, it is helpful to realize that a talent was the highest denomination of money in the ancient Jewish world. A talent was the equivalent of twenty years of wages for a working man. Thus, even one talent would be the equivalent of about a million dollars. One cannot hear the bad outcome of this servant and place the failure at the feet of the master for providing scant funding for any of the men. The rich man then departs, presumably heading out somewhere to make more money. Regardless, he leaves, entrusting those large sums to his stewards. Well, two of the three men begin investing the entrusted money. The third one chooses to do differently. Instead of using the money to make more money, the steward buries the money in the backyard, so to speak. While this would seemingly present an upside of not losing anything, it is clearly not what is in the mind of the master.

For when he returns, an accounting must be given. The first steward, the one who was given 5 talents has done well. He’s leveraged the money his master has entrusted him with and made 5 more talents. A double. A great return. The second steward has equaled that return, returning back to his master not only the two talents originally given but adding another two of profits. For this great work, both men are applauded verbally, “Well done my good and faithful servant.” But the third servant, the one who buried the treasure in the backyard? Well, he just returns the one talent. And, in times like we’re in presently, that doesn’t look like too bad a rate a return. After all, one of the reason people put money into fixed assets like gold is that they are expecting a near-equal return on their money without taking any losses. In times where the market is hanky like it is now, that may not be a bad monetary strategy. But, as far as the parable goes, it was a wrong move. The third servant is chastised, thrown into the outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of feet. Consider those two final outcomes and consider which one you desire for yourself. Hearing the celebratory voice of a well-pleased supervisor or rather hearing weeping and gnashing of teeth? I know which I prefer.

And it would all be so very comforting the Bible that is, if there weren’t parables and passages that talk about judgment, a final judgment. Which, when you think about it, is the only truly rational deduction one can make

given the known parameters. First, that we live in a universe created by a good God. If that's a case, there must be a final accounting. Good and evil matter and must be meted out in the end. Logic doesn't give us Christ's return. After all, why would he, got killed the first time through. Logic doesn't give us everlasting life. In fact, from ashes we have come and to ashes we will return is what the Bible says. No, but logic does demand a judgment. There's got to be a time and a place in a universe ordered by a good God where good deeds are rewarded and bad deeds are punished. Judgment, is therefore, an imperative although we don't tend to think in terms like those.

The final parable in the three included in Matthew 25 talks about judgment on a personal scale. Where, it wonders, have we done the work of healing and feeding that Jesus has called us individually too. Here, the point becomes that there are some who believe themselves Christians who aren't doing the work Christ called us to, who will be very surprise when the judgment comes.

And that's just what these three parables have in common – the surprise of those that have failed. The ten virgins without oil are surprised when they aren't let back into the celebration. The one stewards is surprised that his master isn't pleased with his return. Those that have left the work of Christ undone are surprised NOT to be inclined amongst the sheep. It reminds me of that performance review long ago. I went into it thinking I was the greatest thing since sliced bread. When I came out of it, I had a very different, probably more honest, assessment of my labor.

That's not the kind of surprise I want from my ultimate judgment. I'd prefer not to hear weeping and gnashing of teeth, not really, don't want that at all, thank you very kindly. But, as I said, if this chapter, if this parable gives you the willies, I completely understand. But it is Biblical. As much as we protestants like to remain within our justification by faith model, the Bible has much to say to temper that outlook with works. "Faith without works is dead," or at least so says James but that's not the only time in Scripture you'll find such remonstrances. James 2:14-26 – *"What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled," without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? So also, faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. But someone will say, "You have faith and I have works." Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works."*

Jesus also talks about works but does so using the language of fruits. As in *"ye shall know them by their fruits."* Now listen, we do not believe our fruits creates our salvation. No, Jesus did that alone. For by grace you have been saved by faith and this is not your own doing so that no one may boast. But we do believe that those who are blessed with a saving faith will also be blessed to do many works, bear much fruit for the Lord. So much so that we can, with Jesus say, we know the true Christians by their works, not their words. We can see the fruit of their Godly labor all around us as they go into the world doing what the Lord has called them to. So, then what we can say is this. Those who are saved are saved by faith and that faith is a gift from God. But then here is what we can also say about those who have faith, they WORK. That is to say, they produce fruits.

Sometimes, I'm a fruit bearer, on other occasions, just like everyone else, I show my vainglory. Just the other day, I called someone to ask if a certain task had gotten done. If it hadn't, I was willing to help. But I waited two days to call and, of course, it had gotten done. Sometimes I'm like that in my Christian walk as well. I'm a pastor which means that I get the opportunity to do good things for a living. But how am I when I'm "off the clock" so to speak. Am I bearing fruit or am I just earning an income? Somedays, just like with you, are better than others. But these parables draw back home to us the overwhelming importance of our work to our faith life. To borrow from our parable, are we burying our talents. And, while it's happenstance that the words are the same, it is a fair question to ask. How are we using our talents? Assuming that each and every one of us, created in the image of God, have also been blessed with unique talents and abilities, it is a fair question to ask – what are we doing with what has so freely been provided to us?

One of the things that a facile justification by faith alone belief has the tendency to do is make us spiritually quite lazy. Believing that our belief is the only thing that matters, we do scant little actual work in building the kingdom. After all, why bother as we know we're in because we believe in Jesus. That's an unbiblical way of thinking though. It's like we've excerpted pieces of the Bible to get us there, leaving entirely behind entire sections and parables, just like the parable of the talents.

So, if you were to take a Christian job assessment today, how would you do? I ask because it seems to be the case that one day, in the Kingdom, we will be asked just such a query. And, with it, our lives will show whether we invested those talents or buried them in the backyard? The parable of the talents clearly teaches us that we work not for ourselves but for our Master. If that's the case, then it begs the question – am I using the gifts God gave me for my own ends exclusively, I have an analogue in the parable – the servant who buries their talent in the back yard. Just this morning, I was struck by the idea that if someone gave me \$1 million dollars, I would take my time to figure out how to make the most money with it but seldom to I make a list of my own talents and try to figure out how I might better use them for the Lord. And, which is more likely to happen? Me, out of the blue, receive a million dollars or just be able to use what God gave me more for His Glory than my own.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.