

A 6-year-old boy asked his father: “Dad, I know babies come from mommies’ tummies, but how do they get there in the first place?” The dad hemmed and hawed awhile, and his son finally spoke up, “You don’t have to make up something, Dad. It’s ok if you don’t know the answer.”

Paul Newman founded the HOLE IN THE WALL GANG CAMP for children stricken with cancer, AIDS, and blood diseases. One afternoon, he and his wife, Joanne Woodward, stopped at the camp to have lunch with the kids. A counselor at a nearby table, suspecting the young patients would not know Newman was a famous movie star, explained, “That’s the man who made this camp possible. Maybe you’ve seen his picture on his salad dressing bottle?” Blank stares all around. “Well, you’ve probably seen his face on his lemonade carton.” An 8-year-old perked up. “How long was he missing?”

OK, let’s dig into the text a bit. This man was obviously fabulously wealthy. We’re talking Bill Gates & Warren Buffet wealthy. And in the ancient world such men often left their estates for long periods to establish new trading partners/products/routes. Given the precarious nature of travel in those days, no one knew when he might possibly return. The servants are entrusted with huge sums of money. As our AT HOME WITH THE WORD books tells us: “A ‘talent’ was more than a daily wage a worker could make in 15 years! 8 talents – the amount doled out to the servants -- would be more than 120 years of daily wages. (p. 141) We’re talking millions of dollars in today’s terms. When the text says that the first 2 servants ‘traded with the talents entrusted to them’ it means moneylending. Moneylending was common and was often done through temples, which normally doubled as banks, because deposits were considered safe there. Since few people had capital, those who did could lend money at significant interest. Investors thus could receive 5 or 10 times their investment; at the very least, they could double their investment.

We are told that one servant hid his master’s money. People often buried money in a strongbox to keep it safe, but it would have been safe with the bankers and also increased in value.

It was not unusual to trust slaves with great responsibility, and therefore, great sums of money. Slaves could be rewarded for good performance, so a lot became possible from what they do with what is entrusted to them. Roman law allowed slaves not only to manage estates, but also to earn and hold money and receive bonuses. Some imperial freedmen even wielded more power than many aristocrats.

And finally, the servant who buried the talent. He excuses himself by saying that ‘you were a harsh man.’ This would have been a shocking insult, as he essentially blames his master’s harsh character for his own failure to increase his master’s investment. (CULTURAL BACKGROUNDS STUDY BIBLE, p. 1682) And once again, in a shame-honor based culture, we see why the servant is treated so harshly – losing his position and being thrown into the outer darkness. Santa Claus decides he’s naughty, not nice! Coal for him on Christmas morning!

Second, there’s no doubt that Matthew – in a way unlike Mark, Luke, or John, asserts that divine judgment is real and that exclusion from God’s realm is fully possible if we refuse to live as Jesus has directed. Here’s a gospel in which there is weeping and gnashing of teeth, exclusion from wedding feasts, the gavel coming down and the door being locked. If our stress is upon Jesus as unconditional, all-accepting, utterly gracious love, Matthew’s stress on judgment as encouragement for good works in the name of Christ is sure to make us uncomfortable.

The third slave receives much more attention in the parable, the one who buried his one talent in the ground. And note that he is judged for what he failed to do! The severe judgment of the third slave seems to be the intention of the parable – all the talk of the slave's uselessness, the casting into outer darkness, the wailing and gnashing of teeth. There's no doubt that the parable wants to talk about judgment.

It is fair to say that Matthew's apocalyptic – the grand unveiling, the revelation – is meant to show us something about God and ourselves that has enduring relevance. Knowing the end, the ultimate judgment, the eventual return of the master, how then should we live now?

It's important when working with biblical apocalyptic to understand that apocalyptic is not solely concerned with the future but also with the present. The parable is being told by Jesus who is, in His crucifixion and resurrection, both present to them and yet absent from them, both available to them and yet far away, so what's the relevance of this now-not yet quality of Jesus for our own present existence?

We don't know when the master will return and settle accounts – either at our individual death or when God brings history to a close. What we do know is that the master one day will return and that the master connects what He has given to us with what we do with it. The master's grace is to be responded to with our good deeds and generous cooperation.

One interpretation of this parable is that God's gifts are God's assignments; grace entails responsibility; God's grace includes judgment. (adapted from Willimon, PULPIT RESOURCE, 15 November 2020, p. 21-22)

Third, knowing that God will hold us accountable is also to recognize that God values our contributions to His kingdom, that He counts on our cooperation and using our gifts with increase for the sake of others.

One of my closest friends in high school played basketball – and he was very good at it. (I, on the other hand, cannot walk and chew gum at the same time). One time, he was yanked out of the game and derided publicly on the sidelines for his failure to guard his man. He told me that at halftime the coach spent most of the time in the locker room yelling at him in front of the entire team, telling him exactly what he had done wrong and threatening him with further consequences if he did not 'step up and play up to your abilities.'

As I was attempting to console my friend – telling him that I thought the coach was out of line, the coach's behavior of being 'way over the top' treating him in this way – he interrupted me and said, "Coach is really the first person who ever told me that I was really talented. He has given me a lot of personal attention, telling me that he thinks I am really gifted, that I could maybe play ball in college. I think he was so angry with me because he cares so much about me."

There is something of the image of God in that coach in light of this story. By some weird mystery, what you and I do here on this earth, has eternal consequences. God cares about what we do with our lives. Little old us! With great big God! And His kingdom no less!

What's worse than judgment and accountability? Worse if the masters' return had the master saying to the servants, "Oh, you made some money by investing the money? That's no big deal. Anybody could do it. I'm surprised you didn't make me even more money." Or, in the case of the one-talent gifted slave, for the master to say, "You didn't make any money off of that one talent? Doesn't really matter. Just as I predicted. You are a slave, and you should stay a slave. You have no ability beyond menial slavery."

Maybe Matthew tells us this story in order to encourage us: 1) to recognize and give thanks to God for His good gifts; then 2) to go out and live our lives as responsible recipients of God's gifts. Maybe all of us

ought to invest ourselves in the hope that the same God who gave us good lives may one day say to us, “Well done! You are good and faithful! Enter into my joy!”

Or, perhaps taking our cues from the second part of the parable, we ought to live our lives in such a way that we ask ourselves, “What have I done with what I have been given? How am I risking and investing the gifts God gave me, or failing to do so? Have my bad choices, my failure actively to respond to God’s claim on my life, my failure to tithe and be generous with my money, cast me into a dark place away from God?”

Either way we take it, I’m sure that Matthew recorded this parable – and retold it to us – hoping that each of us would hear and would put ourselves into the story. God thinks we are important to His kingdom. Do we? (last 2 sections adapted from Willimon, PULPIT RESOURCE, Oct-Dec 2020, p. 22-23)