

Twenty-Fourth Sunday after Pentecost, Gospel Year A

Being a Theologian of the Cross*

Matthew 25:14-20

Twenty-Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

Analysis by Chris Repp

[Jesus said to the disciples:] 14“For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; 15to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. 16The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. 17In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. 18But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master’s money. 19After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. 20Then 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.’ 21His 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.’ 22And 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.’ 23His 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.’ 24Then 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; ²⁵so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.' ²⁶But 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? ²⁷Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. ²⁸So 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.'"



Author's Note: My analysis depends upon Bruce J. Molina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh's Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels, which proposes that this is not a parable of the Kingdom of Heaven but a story that sets up a contrast with the subsequent section of this chapter on the sheep and the goats.

The master here, therefore, does not stand in for Jesus, but for the rulers of this world, and the slaves for those who serve and enable the rulers of this world. The capitalism that we take for granted in our context, accumulating and serving wealth, Malina and Rohrbaugh suggest, would be seen as systemic theft by Matthew's ancient audience, which is then contrasted with caring for "the least," which characterizes those fit for the Kingdom of Heaven. The burying of the one talent was the honorable way to safeguard the master's property without further injustice.

** My title and subtitles are drawn from thesis 21 of Luther's Heidelberg Disputation (1518): "A theologian of glory calls evil good and good evil. A theologian of the cross calls a thing what it actually is."*

DIAGNOSIS: Calling Evil Good and Good Evil

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): Enabling the Powers that Be

The master in this story has a lot of "property." (Maybe "assets" is a better translation of τὰ ὑπάρχοντα?) A quick estimate based on a minimum wage of \$8/hour yields a total of \$5.6 million. He entrusts these assets to three of his people. The wealthy always have people. Even I, though far from this kind of wealthy, employ an accountant and a financial advisor. The master expects his people to use his wealth to make more wealth, just as I expect my accountant to minimize my tax liability and my financial advisor to grow my assets. While we consider such behavior responsible and praiseworthy in our culture and economic system, ancient people believed that the relationship of wealth and poverty was a zero-sum game. If one person was wealthy this was understood to be at the cost of poverty for others. St. John Chrysostom, the 4th century Patriarch of Constantinople, preached that those who had excess wealth had, effectively, robbed widows and orphans. Thus, the servants in this story may be seen to be aiding and abetting their master's

theft.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): Trusting the Way the World Works

Why would these servants willingly participate in such injustice? Undoubtedly because they, too, benefit. Having used their master's wealth to create more wealth (and thus more poverty for others), the first two servants are each rewarded with a promotion.

Is our relationship in our own time and place to the way the world works not similar to these servants? Are we not complicit in perpetuating systems of injustice that impoverish some to benefit others, ourselves included? You do not have to accept every aspect of ancient economics to recognize the injustices in our own.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): Eternal Punishment

If this reading of the parable is correct, then these servants' complicity in evil (called good by their master) makes them, with their master, enemies of the Lord, as revealed at the end of this chapter, and condemns them to eternal punishment.

Does our endorsement and defense of the status quo not similarly place us in the ranks of our Lord's enemies. Do we not stand similarly condemned?

PROGNOSIS: Calling Things What They Are



Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): Life in the Outer Darkness

The place of punishment at the end of the pericope under consideration (and perhaps also at the end of the chapter) foreshadows the place of punishment where Jesus is soon to be found as the final events of this Gospel quickly unfold. Surprisingly, scandalously, the salvation of sinners begins with God present with us (“Emmanuel,” Matt. 1:23) in the outer darkness, in the place of our punishment, and extends to the end of the age (Matt. 28:20). There evil is named for what it is and it is undone by the cross.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Trust in God vs. the “System”

This unexpected mercy, this unimaginable good news, begins to rearrange our priorities and values, exposing the lie of the evil in which we had been participating. Now we are opened up to following the self-giving way of the cross that trusts God and

cares for others, especially those who have been the victims of the evil we abetted.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): Honorable Faithfulness in Spite of Temporal Consequences

Living by such faith, we are empowered to deal honorably and faithfully with what has been entrusted to us, emboldened to resist the “powers of this world that rebel against God” and “the ways of sin that draw [us] from God” (Evangelical Lutheran Worship baptismal liturgy), and prepared to endure the hostility of those who do not yet believe the good news that has the power to transform their lives as well. It is for that transformation that we persist.