

Matthew 25:24–30 — I Knew Thee, That Thou Art a Hard Man

The Projection of a Guilty Conscience, the Lord Who Does Not Reap Where He Has Not Sown, and the Outer Darkness

Scripture Reading: Matthew 25:24–46

“Then he which had received the one talent came and said, Lord, I knew thee that thou art an hard man, reaping where thou hast not sown, and gathering where thou hast not strawed: and I was afraid, and went and hid thy talent in the earth: lo, there thou hast that is thine.

“His lord answered and said unto him, Thou wicked and slothful servant, thou knewest that I reap where I sowed not, and gather where I have not strawed: thou oughtest therefore to have put my money to the exchangers, and then at my coming I should have received mine own with usury.”

“Cast ye the unprofitable servant into outer darkness: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

A Guilty Conscience Forms Opinions

When Adam and Eve hid themselves in the garden after they had sinned, they hid because they were sure God would deal harshly with them. They had not yet heard God say anything harsh. The opinion that God was hostile came from their own guilty conscience — a conscience freshly acquired by eating the forbidden fruit, and immediately at work projecting onto God what was true about themselves. This is the pattern that reappears here in the one-talent servant.

He says: I knew thee, that thou art a hard man, reaping where thou hast not sown, and gathering where thou hast not scattered. He characterizes the Lord in two ways: as to his person — a hard man — and as to his conduct — reaping and gathering where he had no right. Where did these opinions come from? They came from somewhere, and they did not come from anywhere good. He was projecting the state of his own heart onto the Lord. This is a frequent thing that happens in general — people project what is true about themselves onto the other person. In this case it was absolutely fatal to him.

The Lord's reply names the man's actual character: thou wicked and slothful servant. Wicked answers to the characterization of his person; slothful answers to the characterization of his conduct. He had accused the Lord on both counts; the Lord charges him on both counts in return. It was not the Lord whose person and conduct were defective. It was this man himself. He had projected his own wickedness onto a master who was looking for nothing more than someone he could trust.

The Adonijah Parallel: Praying to Mary

The spirit of this man — viewing God as a hard man who will not freely give — is the root of the Catholic practice of praying to Mary to intercede with her son. The reasoning is identical: you cannot go directly to the Lord, because he is difficult of access and hard of heart, so you approach the mother who will not be refused by her son and ask her to dispose him in your favour.

There is a precise biblical example of this logic, and it is instructive to see where it led. In 1 Kings 2:16, Adonijah came to Bathsheba the mother of King Solomon with a petition. He said: speak, I pray thee, unto Solomon the king, for he will not say thee nay. Bathsheba agreed to speak for him, and she went very politely to the king. The result is recorded in verse 23: King Solomon swore by the Lord, saying, God do so to me and more also, if Adonijah have not spoken this word

against his own life. What he had hoped to obtain through the mother's intercession cost him his life. The scripture gives us the example in order to show where this approach ends.

The contrast is sharp with the blind man's cry that had been before the assembly earlier that same morning: Jesus, thou son of David, have mercy upon me. That cry goes directly to the Lord — it has no intermediary, no need of a mother's intercession. And it assumes the very opposite of a hard man. Have mercy implies that the Lord is merciful; that he is disposed toward the petitioner; that he will hear. The one-talent servant would have been infinitely better served to come to his master and say: have mercy upon me. Instead he came with accusations.

The Lord Does Not Reap Where He Has Not Sown

The charge that the Lord reaps where he has not sown is false on its own terms. Matthew 13:3-9 gives the parable of the sower, and when the Lord explained it he said: the field is the world (verse 38). He sows in the whole world. Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God — that word is the Lord's own sowing. He reaps from what he has sown. The accusation has no ground.

Faith always traces the origin of things back to the hand of God. However unusual the path by which the gospel reaches a soul — a tract left in an unlikely place, a Hindu man reading the gospel to a Muslim and both being saved — faith sees the hand of the Lord in it. The Lord sent the tract; it was his word sown in his field. Those who can only see as far as the hand of man will miss this. The accusation this man levelled against his master was the accusation of a man who could see no further than the surface of things.

The Talent Still in the Earth: What the Lord Was Looking For

This man was so uninterested in his master's concerns that he had not even brought the talent back when he came to give account. It was still in the earth where he had buried it. The Lord did not go and dig it up. Instead he took it from him and gave it to the one who had ten talents.

This tells us what the Lord was actually looking for. The faithful servants did not get their commendation by putting the money out to the money changers to earn a little interest. In fact, the money-changer option is the minimum that could be said about this servant — at least he would have earned something. But that was not at all what the Lord had in mind. The Lord was looking for trustworthy persons who had entered into something of his heart, who understood what he valued and what he was building toward. He wanted persons to set over many things. The enter thou into the joy of thy Lord was not an afterthought but the whole point: the faithful servants had already entered into something of the king's heart, and the reward was the fullness of that. This man had entered into nothing of it. All he could think of was the money, which is what he supposed the master was after — because it was what he himself was after.

Outer Darkness: Not a Missed Kingdom Blessing

Some have argued that the outer darkness into which the useless servant is cast means nothing more than exclusion from the kingdom — that he misses a reward but is not lost. This is a theological system protecting itself from what the scripture plainly says. Comparing scripture with scripture, without a system getting in the way, it is clear that the outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth is the same place as where the worm dieth not and the fire is not quenched, the same as the gloom of darkness forever of which Jude speaks when describing men who had crept into the Christian profession. The useless servant is cast there not because he had a bad day, but because his uselessness characterized him steadily and continuously — it was what he was.

The useless tool goes in the trash. It is good for nothing if it is not useful for what it was made for. Matthew 24:51 adds another dimension: the evil servant there is cut in two — that is, divided, which is the picture of hypocrisy, two-facedness. His portion is appointed with the hypocrites. The hypocrite is not someone who behaves inconsistently on occasion; it is a constitutional description of a person who does not know the Lord. The outer darkness answers to the moral character of those who are cast there: God is light, and those who know him are light in the Lord. The outer darkness is the place of those for whom light never came in.

The three great classes — Jew (Matthew 24:1–44), the assembly (Matthew 24:45–25:30), and Gentile nations (Matthew 25:31–46) — are each addressed in this section of Matthew's Gospel. Moving the parenthetical section elsewhere, into the tribulation or the Jewish future, is a way of avoiding its bearing on Christendom now. Because if the midnight cry has gone out in Christendom — and it has — then the question immediately arises: what was that cry? what was recovered? and what is my responsibility with respect to it? A tidy theological relocation of the passage avoids those questions.

Enter thou into the joy of thy Lord. There shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.