
When is "The Master' Not God?"

A Sermon by the Rev. Thee Smith, Priest Assoc.

In the name of God, our Maker, Defender, Redeemer, and Friend! Amen.

How do we tell which representations of God are genuine? What clues are there? For example, is the king or master in Jesus' parables always meant to be a symbol of God the Father? Or do some scriptures internally resist our identification of the central figure as a representation of God? Take today's parable, obviously: Matthew 25.14-30. Is the "harsh master' here, who expels the third servant because he did not return a profit from his master's wealth" is that really the kind of character we are meant to identify with "the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ? It's a rhetorical question you can tell. But I suggest it's the right question for such a "parabolic' parable!

Consider: when Jesus first told the parable did he intend for his hearers to identify that kind of master with his own Father in heaven? To the contrary, one commentator has declared. In effect, she implies, this master is a decoy.

(1)
Decoy "Master'

Take a hard look at the behavior of the master: he's an absentee landlord who doesn't do any work himself, but lives off of the labor of his slaves. Take a look at the behavior this master wants of his slaves: the profit-making that the master demands would be seen in Jesus' culture . . . [to come] at the expense of other more honest people; it would be seen as greedy and grasping rather than smart or virtuous.

.....
Is the behavior of the master in the parable something that God would commend, let alone imitate? Is this kind of behavior what Jesus expects of God's people?

[Sarah Breuer, Director of Christian Formation, St. Martin's-in-the-Field Episcopal Church, Severna Park, Maryland; November 28, 2004, "The Good News of Advent: Jesus is no Ruthless Master;" accessed 11/13/2011 at www.sarahlaughed.net/sermons/2004/11/jesus_is_no_rut.html]

Another commentary is even more explicit:

The challenge of preaching this parable is to . . . disconnect the master from God . . . Fact is, the master is like a God, but a god of this world, a violent uncaring deity . . . But God is not like that . . .

[Michael Hardin and Jeff Krantz, Preaching Peace, XXIV Pentecost, Year A; accessed 11/13/2011 at www.preachingpeace.org/lectionaries/yeara-proper28/]

Now we have just considered (1) the character of the master. But there are at least two other issues here. Second, consider

the "talents' of money that the master distributes to his servants. And third, let's reflect on the striking behavior of that third servant—the one who hides his master's money and is harshly punished for doing so.

Taking them in order we turn now to our second consideration; the so-called "talents' in today's parable. Here our commentator, in the same way that she exposed the master in the parable as a decoy, now casts suspicion on the way we traditionally interpret the word, "talents' to mean skills or abilities in addition to the literal meaning, money.

(2)

Pseudo "Talents'

The Greek word for "talent' very specifically means a unit of money; it has no relationship whatsoever to the word for an ability, so this is NOT a parable about us being the best we can be, no matter how much our culture of achievement wants to twist it into that. There are versions of that message that can be helpful, but it just isn't what the parable is about . . .

.....

In short [she pleads], PLEASE don't tell people that the message of this Sunday's gospel is anything along the lines of "make the most of the talents you've got,' as its message is much closer to "care for those whom the world would leave destitute.' Reading the parable in the context in which it appears in Matthew tells us how Jesus finishes that thought: We shouldn't be like the master in the parable because the world in which people like that come out on top is passing away.

.....

If you've got any doubts of that, read what comes immediately after this story: read the prophesy (it isn't a parable) of the sheep and the goats, which tells us that when the Son of Man comes, judgment will not be on the basis of how much money we made, or for that matter on how religious we were or whether we said a "sinner's prayer," but rather on whether we saw that the least of our sisters and brothers in the human family, whether in or out of prison, had food, clothing, and health care. We serve Jesus himself to the extent that we do these things, and we neglect Jesus himself to the extent that we don't . . . [Sarah Breuer, "The Good News . . . Jesus is No Ruthless Master," *ibid.*]

Finally we turn to the third servant in the parable. Concerning this third character yet another commentator has described him as a resister to the economic values of his master, rather than a weak-willed failure as an investment marketer.

(3)

"Suffering' Servant

Jesus makes the introduction and the [expulsion] of the [third servant] the most visible act in the parable. [The third servant] certainly becomes the focus of the [master's] attention, and our attention naturally follows the [master's] concerns. The [servant] has so large a claim on the [master's] attention because he appears to unite in one place, and defy as one man, all the [master's] obsessions [with investments and profit-making] . . . The normal reading of the parable understands the [master's] obsession and justifies [his] reaction to this man. [The man] is seen as the most reprobate in a long line of reprobates . . . [and we too are made to feel the need for him to be punished] . . .

Now here our commentator makes a bold proposal:

I propose only one change in this picture we tend to have of the parable. Actually, the picture itself can stay the same. All we need to change is one assumption . . . [If we] credit the victim with intentionality and . . . view the victim's meeting with the [master] as intentional and done with foresight, and not accidental or through negligence . . . our victim now holds out the promise of being understood as the "suffering servant."

.....

[Consider the "suffering servants' of] Isaiah 52 and 53 . . . drawing on to themselves the sufferings of the nation as a whole, so that the nation may somehow escape. In Isaiah's suffering servant verses the servant takes on the infirmity or the disease at the heart of the people's suffering . . . These verses [help us] understand Jesus' portrayal of the [third servant].

He was despised and we held him of no account/ Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases/ yet we accounted him stricken, struck down by God and afflicted/ But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities/ upon him was the punishment that made us whole . . . and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. (Isaiah 53:3-6)

Nonetheless, our commentator admits, "there is nothing that forces the reader to accept that this description of the suffering servant applies to the [third servant] of Jesus' parable."

[With apologies and gratitude to the author I have excerpted and adapted her treatment of Jesus' Parable of the Wedding Banquet (Matthew 22.1-14) to today's Parable of the Talents (Matthew 25.14-30). Source: Marty Aiken (Racine Wisconsin), "The Kingdom of Heaven Suffers Violence: Discerning the Suffering Servant in the Parable of the Wedding Banquet," martyaiken@aya.yale.edu; accessed 11/13/2011 at http://girardianlectionary.net/res/innsbruck2003_Aiken_Paper.doc]

Of course she's right; indeed, after entertaining all the preceding commentaries we may still decide that the traditional reading of today's parable is essentially correct in the three particulars:

- (1) that the master represents a righteous God;
- (2) that the talents symbolize not only money but also the skills and abilities given by God for the sake of a profitable return; and
- (3) that the third servant, failing that obligation, is rightfully punished.

In sum we would conclude that Jesus tells the parable so that all his hearers, including ourselves, will emulate the first two servants. This is another case, we would assent, in which "the kingdom of heaven is like" or "compared to" the key features of the parable. (Note: that is the phrase that accompanies most of the other parables in Matthew, chapters 13, 18, 20, 22, and 25, but is curiously omitted in this parable.)

But before we leave this question entirely consider this comedy version of the question, "How do we tell which representations of God are genuine?"

(4)
Parody "'Parable'

I don't normally watch "The Daily Show with Jon Stewart," that popular comedy show on television. But the following episode came to my attention recently, and it has interesting connections to today's scriptures. The episode features Jon Stewart attempting to mediate disagreements between a Mormon believer, and a mainstream, or Protestant Christian.

It's presented as part of the current political climate, in which Republican candidate, Mitt Romney, is the first Mormon to run for President. There's also an interesting twist, that Stewart, who moderates the show, himself is Jewish. So you have a scene in which a Jew is moderating a religious debate between a Mormon and a Protestant!

In the comedy episode, Stewart points out that Mormons and mainstream Christians believe the same things about Jesus; whatever their differences are on other points.

"It really seems you guys agree on the basics," he reminds the two actors who are comically representing the two traditions.

So, he then proceeds, "Should being Mormon disqualify you from the Presidency? I mean, you both believe in Jesus, right?"

"Yes," and "yes," they both acknowledge.

"So, as long as a Republican candidate believes in the basic tenets, you know, "I am the way and the truth and the life . . . No one comes to the Father except through me . . . Let the one who is amongst you without sin be the first to cast a stone . . ."

Now, at this point the two sparring representatives are nodding their heads in agreement.

One of them admits, "You're right, you're so right."

And the other one also replies, "We're fighting about such silly stuff."

"Exactly," Stewart is quick to press on. And then he takes the conversation into a different arena.

"If you want to be perfect," he continues to quote, "go sell your possessions, and give it to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven."

But at this point the expression on the faces, and the tone of the voice from the two representatives, begins to shift.

"Okayyy," the Mormon says, raising her finger. "Slow down there."

But Stewart continues his blitz of Jesus sayings: "And the man who has two tunics should share with the one who has none; and the one who has food should do the same."

Upon hearing that last statement the Mormon outright disagrees, "No, no, no," she exclaims, and the Protestant also protests,

"What kind of occupy Wall Street blankety blank [expletive deleted] is that! What is that?"

And then, the Mormon declares, "No, I'm pretty sure that Jesus was a free market guy."

But Stewart exclaims defensively, "I'm just quoting scripture."

"Oh, no." "No, no," the Mormon and the Protestant each respond. And on that note of negative agreement the episode ends"ends with each representative agreeing that Stewart has misrepresented Jesus by quoting the wrong texts.

[The Daily Show with Jon Stewart, October 17, 2011; Indecision 2012 - Hardcore Sects Edition - Mormonism; www.thedailyshow.com/watch/mon-october-17-2011/indecision-2012--hardcore-sects-edition---mormonism]

Well here (yet again) we get to apply Mark Twain's familiar joke, "It ain't the things in scripture I don't understand that bother me; it's the things I do understand that bother me!"

In this case, of course, we have before us "'the things in scripture' that we have just been debating about in the Parable of the Talents. It's those "'things in scripture' that call for us to decide for ourselves which representations of God are true for us and which are decoys. In that connection, and as your preacher of today's gospel, I want to encourage you in the way that St. Paul exhorted us to encourage one another in today's reading from 1 Thessalonians:

For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ,

who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him.

Therefore encourage one another and build up each other . . .

1 Thessalonians 5.9-11

So whether we are "awake or asleep" we are nonetheless destined for better things than wrath or rejection. Let both of those among us be encouraged therefore, those who are awake and those who are asleep, that we serve not a "harsh master" but a generous God who destines us for obtaining salvation; yes, salvation rather than the "outer darkness" that obtains where people do not welcome his advent.

And let us "encourage one another" whether or not we can agree about how to interpret the Parable of the Talents. For we can agree on the truth about scripture that is declared in our opening prayer: the Collect appointed for this next-to-last Sunday in the church season of Pentecost. It's found there in our scripture insert or bulletin. Please join me therefore in praying again our collective prayer for today:

Blessed Lord, who caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning; Grant us so to hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Savior Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

[From: Lessons Appointed for Use on the Sunday closest to November 16, Year A, Proper 28; Episcopal Church adaptation of the Revised Common Lectionary (RCL); accessed 11/13/2011 at www.lectionarypage.net/YearA_RCL/Pentecost/AProp28_RCL.html]

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

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