

The joy of what kind of master? (Matthew 25: 14-30; 33A)

## **This master's ways are celebrated by the world, not by Jesus.**

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In the context of the rest of the 25th chapter and the entire Gospel of Matthew, there is no case to be made that the master in this parable should be allegorized as Jesus, comforter of the poor, or God, who hears the cries of the oppressed and sets out a way of life summed up by Jesus in “Love your neighbor as yourself.”

This parable is not promoting responsible investing or venture capitalism. It is significant that the master in the story does not dispute the third slave’s characterization of him as “a harsh man, reaping where he did not sow and gathering where he did not scatter seed.” The master all but says, “You’re right—and therefore you should have invested with the bankers and gained interest,” which is forbidden by the law (Ex. 22 and Lev. 25).

Both Matthew and Jesus’ audience would have balked at that. Faces in the crowd would have looked at their neighbors silently asking, “Can you believe he just said that, right out loud!?” The plain reading of the text is that the master is representative of those who are unjust in their business practices. He does not care how the slaves make more money for him. He just wants more, and he doesn’t care who knows it.

His ways are celebrated by the world, and the “joy” into which he welcomes his “faithful” ones is excess wealth gained by systems that perpetuate oppression.

There is no shortage of people in the world today to compare him to, people celebrated for their ruthlessness and immorality because it has made them extraordinarily wealthy. People like this are the reason Jesus could say with certainty, “The poor you will always have with you” (Mt. 26:11).

As Matthew’s community lived eagerly awaiting Jesus’ return, the big question was not *if* one should be faithful but to whom and to what. Likewise, while we wait for Jesus’ return, do we allow ourselves to be defined by actors who are unscrupulous and immoral? Do we, for the sake of getting along and enjoying life, say, “Well, that’s just the way things are” and do nothing to resist or change injustice?

This is a question I ask when I see a church capitulating to the bottom-of-the-barrel personnel practices that have become commonplace in our world, especially for part-time staff: no paid time off, no health insurance, no overtime pay. The answer I get is usually some version of, “Well, no church around here does that.” Not only should churches do better than that, we should be leading in advocacy for the fair treatment and pay of all workers in all industries.

Whenever the outer darkness and gnashing of teeth come up, I picture Jesus there bringing comfort and freedom. The judgment of the nations at the end of Matthew 25 makes the strongest case of all biblical texts, other than the passion story, that we encounter the Divine One in the most despised and mistreated humans. In Matthew 27:22, Pilate stands before the crowds and asks, “What should I do with Jesus who is called the Messiah?” They answer him, “Let him be crucified!” In response he asks them, “Why, what evil has he done?”

When we read this parable of the talents today, that is still the question to ask of the master about the third slave. Why? What evil has he done? As that slave is led away, I can hear “Why have you forsaken me?” on his lips. This is a story of judgment about throwing people away. We need to see that the ones who reject injustice and are killed for it are the same as the One who hangs on the cross.

We can extol their *unfaithfulness* to a way of life that is death dealing. They never sold out to enter the joy of earthly masters. Instead they followed Jesus and knew the joy of the servant the world never understood.