

“Well Done Good and Faithful Servant”

Matthew 25:14-30

We continue on in this mini season at the end of the church year when we focus on the Last Days, and the coming judgment for those who will be cast into the outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth, and the coming glory of eternity in the presence of God for those to whom God will say, “Well done, good and faithful servant.”

Last week, we heard tough words from the prophet Amos, “Woe to you who desire the Day of the Lord. . . the Day of the Lord is darkness and not light, and gloom with no brightness in it.” But remember, Jesus’ words were even harder for us to hear as He said to the five foolish virgins, “I do not know you.” And He shut the door and left them out in the darkness.

It sounds a lot like what we hear this week. The prophet Zephaniah sounds a lot like the prophet Amos. Just like in our world today, the prophet Zephaniah lived among a people who had this imagination in their mind that there is no need to fear any judgment. Yet, the Lord says, “I will punish the men who are complacent, those who say in their hearts, ‘The Lord will not do good, nor will He do evil.’”

We see the same thing today. Monday morning, on Facebook, I saw a quote which said, “The God that I was raised to believe in wouldn’t send anybody to hell.” And this person was

serious. Think of how much of the Bible you have to eliminate in order for that to be true.

That is the real issue. God's truth is made known in His Word. Everything that we read in Scripture is true. As I said in Bible class last Sunday, "This is what terrifies me." Jesus said, "To those who have been given much, much more will be demanded." And "Woe to those who cause one of these little ones to stumble. It would be better for him to have a millstone tied around his neck and be thrown into the sea."

Zephaniah says that the Day of the Lord is "A day of wrath . . . a day of distress and anguish, a day of ruin and devastation, a day of darkness and gloom." For those who are complacent; for those who are comfortable in their sin; for those who do not "fear the One who can kill both soul and body in hell"; these words are meant to terrify you. The appointed readings for this week and last week should make you feel uncomfortable. That is what the Law of God is designed to do. The Law is there to kill you.

But as St. Paul says, "God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us." The Law killed Him instead of you. He entered the world for this reason. He came to stand between you and the wrath of the Law. He is your strength and your shield. Nothing you do helps in your salvation.

This creates two different ways to look at the words and actions of our life. We live before God in the grace of our Baptism, clothed in the righteousness of Christ. Like in the parable, God has given talents (a measure of some value) each according to his ability.

You stand before your Lord, and everything you do is wrong. Choices are laid before you. Whatever choices you make, the choice will be wrong because there is no perfect solution or sinless action in this world. Every choice, every bit of work you do in life is done in sinful incompleteness. My works are like filthy rags before the Lord. They have no value to Him for making me right with God.

This is why Jesus had to come. This is why Jesus had to die. This is why Jesus had to rise from the dead. And it is correct for us to look at our action, look at our words, look at our daily interaction with others and say, "My works are of no benefit."

So, let's say (hypothetically) that crazy winter weather appeared out of nowhere and it happened to snow in November. Your son or daughter goes out and shovels all of your sidewalks and driveway without even being asked. "Honor your father and mother." This is keeping the Law. But it doesn't improve your standing with God. The Law says, "Love your neighbor as yourself." There are a lot more sidewalks and driveways to shovel. Even if you start in the morning and don't quit until dark, your lack of finishing off everyone's sidewalk is sinful incompleteness. You have not fulfilled the Law.

However, even though it is true that God does not need your good works, your neighbor does. The same action, the same choices I make which are always wrong in the eyes of the Lord because it is done in sinful incompleteness may be of great benefit to my neighbor. It is not pure or perfect, but it is good for him. The role of God's Law in daily life is for the good of your neighbor, more than for the good of you. The focus of the "Thou shalt nots" is for the protection of my neighbor from me. Again,

God doesn't need my good works, but my neighbor does – and this pleases God.

In the Parable of the Talents, as the Master is evaluating the work of His servants, even to the one who had been given five talents – who had made five more, the Master says, “You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter the joy of your Master.”

The work that we do; the choices we make which are never pure or perfect seem little because they are little. But it is the little things that matter to the Lord. Next week in our Gospel reading, we will hear about Jesus on the Last Day dividing and sheep and the goats saying, “I was hungry and you gave me food; I was thirsty and you gave me drink . . .” And the righteous answered, “When did we see you hungry and feed you.” And Jesus says, “Truly, I say to you, as you did to the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.”

These are the two ways of looking at our actions in this life. Caring for your neighbor means nothing as we stand before the judgment seat of God. Every choice you make is wrong, because no choice is perfect. And our sin deserves to be punished. In His mercy, Christ took your punishment for you.

Because God not only loves you, but He loves your neighbor also, for their benefit, He desires for you to care for them and not simply tuck away the gifts of mercy you have received for your own personal comfort.

The Day of the Lord is coming. On that day, whether you have been entrusted with many talents in this life or only a few, there is only one thing that matters – hearing Christ our Lord say to you, “Well done, good and faithful servant.” Amen.