

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

As Christians confessing the catholic faith, that is, the universal faith, that is, “*the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints*” (Jude 3), we confess in the Athanasian Creed: “At [Christ’s] coming all people will rise again with their bodies and GIVE AN ACCOUNT CONCERNING THEIR OWN DEEDS. And those who have DONE GOOD will enter into eternal life, and those who have DONE EVIL into eternal fire.”

Our Lutheran ears, though, are a bit sensitive to such statements. What is that? I thought St. Paul says that we are “*justified by faith apart from works of the law*” (Rom. 3:28) — we are. I thought that “*by grace [we] have been saved through faith. And this is not [our] own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast*” (Eph. 2:8-9) — we have been. Are we then wrong to confess this creed?

And, what then of our Gospel today — the Parable of the Talents? It seems to teach a salvation by works also, doesn’t it? Servants who receive the good reward for their labor in the kingdom? I think not. Indeed, I think an interpretation that makes one’s reward depend on the quantity of one’s good works misses the mark.

Now, last week’s Gospel, today’s, and next week’s from Matthew 25 are all part of a larger discourse by Jesus as He prepares to mount the cross “for us men and for our salvation.” These texts all focus on the return of Christ on the last day and the judgment. Like jigsaw puzzle pieces that link together to make a picture, these texts link together to paint a picture of the last things. The focus of each is a bit different, but they interlock.

In last week’s Gospel, the theme was preparedness. Be ready, for the bridegroom will come unexpectedly. “*Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour*” (Matt. 25:13). In today’s Gospel, there is no hint that master returns unexpectedly, but he did go away “*for a long time*” before he returned to “*settle accounts.*” Thus, the bridegroom’s delay in last week’s Gospel links up nicely with the master’s long absence in today’s.

Moreover, the theme of today’s parable, as I see it, is not preparedness. Rather, it is more about faith and life, and it’s upon these things that the parable turns. For the parable highlights a contrast between the faithful servants who go to work with what the master has entrusted to them (whether five talents or two), and the unfaithful servant who takes what was given him and does nothing.

The three servants in the parable are entrusted with a portion of the master’s property as he goes on a journey. How gracious the master is! These servants don’t deserve what was handed over to them, but only two servants recognize it. The master is gracious and not a tyrant. He does not burden them with something

impossible. He gives “*to each according to his ability,*” Jesus said. The two put the talents to work and earned more. The third servant, however, who also received “*according to his ability,*” received one talent, and did nothing with it except hide it away in the ground.

The master returned after a time to settle up, and the first two servants gleefully report to the master all that they had done. For the first servant, the five talents had increased to ten. He was commended: “*Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master.*” Similarly for the second servant who had been given two. The two became four, and he was commended in the same way as the first with the same words.

You see, the master didn’t highlight the distinctions between these two. Both were given according to their ability; both put the talents to work; both earned more; both were commended as good and faithful, for this is what faith in Christ does. Abiding in Christ, we bear fruit; on the other hand, Jesus reminds us that “*apart from me, you can do nothing*” (John 15:5).

Thus it is for the Christian. “[You] cannot be justified before God by [your] own strength, merits, or works. [But you] are freely justified for Christ’s sake, through faith, when [you] believe that [you] are received into favor and that [your] sins are forgiven for Christ’s sake.” Your faith didn’t pay the redemption price for your sins; Christ did that by His cross and death; but by your faith, you receive the fruit of Christ’s sacrifice: forgiveness of sins, and you are accounted righteous. (Augsburg Confession, IV).

But, we also confess that “this faith is bound to bring forth good fruit . . .,” that “It is necessary to do good works commanded by God . . ., because of God’s will” (AC V). Lutherans do not forbid good works; we urge them as “necessary”; just not necessary for salvation. We confess that faith alone saves, but we also confess that faith is never alone, as Luther says. More than that we say: “Faith must be the mother and source of works that are truly good and well pleasing to God, which God will reward in this world and in the world to come.” Luther writes thus:

“Faith . . . is a divine work in us that changes us and makes us to be born anew of God . . . . It kills the old Adam and makes us altogether different men, in heart and spirit and mind and powers; it brings with it the Holy Spirit. O, IT IS A LIVING, BUSY, ACTIVE, MIGHTY THING, THIS FAITH. IT IS IMPOSSIBLE FOR IT NOT TO BE DOING GOOD WORKS INCESSANTLY. It does not ask whether good works are to be done, but before the question is asked, it has already done them, and is constantly doing them. WHOEVER DOES NOT DO SUCH WORKS, HOWEVER, IS AN UNBELIEVER. He gropes and looks around for faith and good works, but knows neither what faith is nor what good works are. Yet he talks and talks, with many words, about faith and good works.

“Faith is a living, daring confidence in God’s grace, so sure and certain that the believer would stake his life on it a thousand times. This knowledge of and confidence in God’s grace makes men glad and bold and happy in dealing with God and all creatures. And this is the work that the Holy Spirit performs in faith. Because of it, without compulsion, a person is ready and glad to do good to everyone, to serve everyone, to suffer everything, out of love and praise to God, who has shown him this grace. Thus it is impossible to separate works from faith, quite as impossible as to separate heat and light from fire. [LW 35:370–71]” (Solid Declaration, IV:9-12).

Thus writes Luther. Did you hear? “Whoever does not do such works ... is an unbeliever.” The third servant in Jesus’ parable was an unbeliever. He also received from the master according to his ability, but he acted wickedly, faithlessly. He buried the talent in the ground; he did NOTHING with the talent, for he viewed the master not as a benevolent master entrusting property to him out of grace and mercy. He viewed the master as hard and greedy, and so this unbelieving servant had no works, not even “interest.” And he reaped the consequence of his wickedness and consequent sloth. He was “*cast ... into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.*”

You get it, right? There’s no need to be dismayed by the good confession in the Athanasian Creed, for who are those who “have done good”? None other than those who believe the catholic faith just enumerated; they “will enter into eternal life.” And those who have done evil? Those who reject this faith in unbelief; they’re the ones who will be cast “into eternal fire.”

As Jesus Himself says: “*Do not marvel at this, for an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment*” (John 5:28-29), and this right after Jesus talks about believing “*him who sent me*” and hearing “*the voice of the Son of God*” (John 5:24-25).

Dear saints, we’ve got it right. We cannot by our “works gain heaven”; “salvation unto us has come by God’s free grace and favor” (LSB555). But that does not mean that we’re lazy bums, burying our talents. We put them to work, “*each according to his ability,*” rejoicing in our salvation for the sake of Jesus, His cross, His resurrection, and living in this salvation, doing the things the Lord would have us do: “*continually [offering] up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name ... not [neglecting] to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God*” (Heb. 13:15-16), that when Christ comes again in glory to settle accounts, we may come to Him as “*good and faithful servants,*” presenting our talents to Him, and He may say to us, “*Enter into the joy of your master.*” Yea Lord, strengthen our faith, and help us do our duty.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.