

**“The Tyranny of Merit” a sermon preached at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand by Jordan Redding on 15 November 2020.**

I.

Much harm has been done over the years with the belief that God is coming again to judge us based on how much good or bad we have done in our lifetimes, or even by how faithful or unfaithful we've been. It can lead to paralysing fear or crippling guilt on the one hand, and to resentment against and rejection of this God on the other.

I would like to borrow a phrase from Michael Sandel, a professor at Harvard University. The phrase is the title of his new book, *The Tyranny of Merit*. He writes from the American context to challenge the idea of the American dream: the belief that one can succeed in life if one works hard enough (with the help of god-given talent); the belief that America is a meritocracy, a society ruled by the brightest and best who, through sheer hard work and ingenuity, have climbed to the top. But this is simply not true, he argues. While there may be some for whom this is the case, these are the exception rather than the rule. And, in fact, while there may technically be a ladder to climb, in recent years the rungs of the ladder have grown farther apart. It is harder and harder to climb the ladder of success as the gap between rich and poor widens. And yet the common narrative of the American Dream feeds the lie that those who are at the top deserve to be there, while those who are at the bottom deserve to be there. It breeds a hubris built on a lie. A hubris that is problematic at best and downright dangerous to our sense of social responsibility and collective pursuit of the common good at worst.

While the elements Sandel talks about aren't quite as pronounced in New Zealand as they are in the U.S., we nonetheless hear similar narratives. That those on the bottom are lazy. And that those on the top have deserved their wealth and influence. This is the tyranny of merit, as Sandel terms it.

We could apply the same to faith and build a picture of God based on a meritocracy: a God who ascribes us worth (or lack of worth) based on our merit (or lack of it). When we hear parables like this one from Matthew 25, we can see why people might develop such a view

of God. The master, we might reasonably assume, is an allegory for Jesus. And the master's coming-again is a story about Jesus' coming again. The only thing is that the master doesn't appear in a particularly favourable light. The parable at first sight seems to provide theological justification for a kind of meritocracy: that God judges us according to our *merit* (or lack of it!). Those who receive the favour of God are those who are the best, who have the most ability.

Each of the slaves, we're told, is given wealth "according to their ability". The slave with the greatest ability is given the greatest amount of responsibility and ends up making the largest gain. He is welcomed with open arms "into the joy of the master". Likewise with the second slave, but to a lesser degree. The third slave, who has the least ability, is given the least and, because he does not invest his master's wealth, is judged harshly and is condemned to "the outer darkness". And so we have the apparent point of the parable: that, to those who have, *more* will be given, and, to those who do not have, even what they have will be taken away."

There is not much room here for grace! And we might reasonably have a knee jerk reaction to such an image of God.

Not only is it a difficult image, but it actually seems to go against other indications of God's character in Matthew's Gospel (and, indeed, in the New Testament generally). Other parables in Matthew tell stories that suggest God is full of grace, quick to forgive, abounding in love. A God who favours and actively searches out those whom the world judges as unworthy. Nowhere is this more explicit than at the beginning of Jesus' famous "Sermon on the Mount"... blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are the meek, blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, etc.

II.

But like so many of Jesus' parables, they are more complex than they first appear. Jesus was a master storyteller, using common metaphors of his day to subvert our understanding of God. We may not sit easily with the parable -- I still don't -- but it at least deserves a fair

hearing. Jesus sets up a scene that would have been common in his day. A wealthy free lord, a *pater familias*, would have had plenty of slaves. And while slaves were slaves, many of them, if they proved trustworthy and able, were given large responsibility, acting on behalf of the master. This is what happens in our story today. The master gives each of the slaves a huge sum. Even the least slave gets one talent, the equivalent of twenty years wages.

It becomes apparent, the closer we look, that the ability level of each slave makes little material difference to how much wealth each makes. The one with the greatest ability is given the greatest capital to invest and does so. He manages to double what he has been given. The slave with the second greatest ability returns less -- but he is also given less capital to invest in the first place. Like the first slave he doubles his income. So both the first and second slave *double* what has been given to them by grace. Their ability makes little difference to the final outcome. The wealth of the master does its own work as it were. The thing that separates the first two slaves from the third is not their ability or their merit. We might reasonably assume that, if the third slave had invested his one talent, he too might have doubled what had been given to him.

Here, I think, the parable subtly undermines a meritocratic understanding of the kingdom of God: that those whom God favours are the best among us.

To return to Sandel again, a similar point is made. While some who have the most power and wealth in our society may be hardworking, creative, kind, generous, etc., it is simply not true that they are more hardworking than people on the bottom. There is, contends Sandel, a large degree of luck as to who succeeds in this life and who doesn't. Those on top would be wise to remember that and live with a degree of humility, which is the base for our commitment to the common good ...but for the grace of God...

It is notable that all *three* slaves begin in the trust of the master and are given a huge amount of wealth and responsibility. All *three* slaves already belong in the masters household!

III.

So what goes wrong for the third slave then? As I've just argued, it's not the slave's lack of ability. It is his fear that the master is a harsh man who will count up every dollar and punish every dollar lost. He creates an image of the master built on his understanding of the dog-eat-dog world we live in, a meritocratic world that says *you are only worth what you produce*. In the master's absence, it affects how he relates to the master, how he deals with what the master has given to him. He does not accept the trust and responsibility of the master but instead is paralysed by fear, sticking his head in the sand.

How often can we slip into the same error? Creating an image of God built on the ruthless economic and political systems of our world. Believing that God does not really have our back as we thought. Fearing for the future when all might be taken from us. Fearing that God will not ultimately provide. And so we live in the present out of a paralysing anxiety and a deep seated fear that what we have now will not be enough. We seek to secure our future by simply hiding what we have in the ground. Holding on selfishly to what we have rather than investing in others with love and generosity.

In a way the third slave's belief in who the master was was a self-fulfilling prophecy. At least that's how I read it. He believed the master was a harsh task-master, who would judge him based on the bottom line, and he lived like that. In the end, his belief came true. He created his own hell, living out of fear rather than out of trust in the master.

While we are children of the light, called to live in the joy of the master, with God and with one another, the third slave stuck his head in the ground, shutting out the light. The ominous outer darkness that Matthew talks about, this *hellish* place, is perhaps Matthew's way of warning us what it's like to live in paralysing fear. We push ourselves to the edge until that becomes our own reality.

We have seen anxiety and fear bubble to surface this year in all the uncertainty. Nowhere more clearly than the fact that, despite repeated assurances that there would be enough food at supermarkets, we still went panic-buying. Toilet paper no less. We turned in

ourselves. Giving into fear. Playing it safe. Seeking to hoard up for ourselves what we could. Secure our present. Such actions arise out of a deep seated fear that what we have won't be enough, that we live in a dog-eat-dog world, that we do not already belong in the household of the master, protected, that the master is not coming back calling us into a party where there is enough for all.

What better picture of hell, than the image of sitting on the toilet, pants around our ankles, surrounded by countless toilet rolls, and yet with an unavoidable feeling of being bereft, exposed, vulnerable and utterly alone. In that place, there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth! Let all with ears to hear, hear! We pray...

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