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“Faithful? Faithless? What Do We See? What Do We Do?”

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Abstract: In the context of declining membership and declining participation in the life of Lutheran churches in America, the article examines the implications for *faithfulness* in Jesus’ parable in Matthew 25:15–30, the parable of the servants and their use of their master’s talents. It suggests that the well-known Latin theological phrase, *simul justus et peccator*, “at the same time saint and sinner,” serves as an accurate description of the work of the church and its members. It acknowledges that the church is challenged internally and externally and offers examples how the church is attempting to respond faithfully to the challenges.

Introduction

Statistically speaking, the Christian Church in America has lost more members than it has gained over the last fifty years.¹ What are the reasons for this decline? Has the Christian Church been faithless in its mission? Does Matthew 25:14–30 have any application in attempting to answer the above questions? Does *simul justus et peccator* have any bearing on the answer to the above questions?

The Parable

Jesus’ parable uses the term *talents* in the sense of money. The difference in



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talents indicates a different sum of the master’s wealth given to each servant. Before the master departs, he gives each servant responsibility for the wealth he received.

The parable contrasts two faithful servants with an unfaithful one. The faithful servants immediately make use of the talents they have been given. The servant with five talents gains five more, and the one with two talents gains two more. The servant who received the one talent buried it in the ground. He did not use the wealth entrusted to him. The fact that he buried it could symbolize deadness. He did not even entrust the master’s wealth with the bankers, from whom he would have received interest.

After a long time, the master returns to settle accounts. He commends the two servants who used the wealth he had entrusted to them. They are described as “faithful” and are told that they have done well (Mt 25:21, 23 NKJV). They enter into the joy of the Lord.

The servant who received one talent gives it back to his master unused. He describes his master as a “hard man” who reaps and harvests where he has not sown (Mt 25:24). This is not a true picture of the master. In addition to speaking ill of his master, he also says that he is “afraid” of his master, which is why he hid his talent (Mt 25:25). The master describes him as a “wicked” and “lazy” servant (Mt 25:26). The talent he had is taken from him and given to the servant who had ten. The wicked servant is thrown into “outer darkness” where there is “weeping and the gnashing of teeth” (Mt 25:30).

This parable appears in the context of Jesus’ teaching about the end times and ultimate judgment. The parable of the ten virgins, which comes before the parable of the talents, encourages all believers to be watchful and prepared for the final judgment (Mt 25:1–13). Watchfulness and preparedness are exhibited by a faithful use of the talents God has given to expand His Kingdom, benefit others, and bring glory to the Lord. After the parable of the talents, Jesus taught about the final judgment (Mt 25:31–46). Being prepared for the final judgment includes being faithful. Being faithful does not gain salvation for believers; rather, it is a result of having been saved by God’s grace. The master in the parable is understood to be the Lord, who has ascended to heaven and commissioned His Church to spread the wealth of His saving Gospel until His return.²

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So what is seen? Faithfulness on the part of the Church, faithlessness, or both? This question needs to be asked because the Church is made up of people who are both saintly and sinful at the same time (*simul justus et peccator*). What does the evidence indicate?

Faithful

Christ's Church expresses faithfulness by using the talents or wealth God has given it. That wealth is centered in the spiritual treasures of God's Word and sacraments, which give sinners His justifying grace. Christ desires that His Church be faithful in teaching and preaching God's Word. That teaching and preaching should be done in truth and purity. Those hearing are to live their faith in accord with what has been taught. Faithful preaching, teaching, and godly living are exhibited each day by many Christians. This is evident in the souls that are saved—the infants, children, and adults who are baptized, the youth and adults who are confirmed, the growth of the church especially in the global South, and the growth in faith experienced by Christians each day. Faithfulness is also seen as Christians are moved by the Holy Spirit to help with flood clean-up, operate health clinics, feed the hungry, counsel the troubled in mind and heart, teach children to pray, and love the outcasts and unlovable.

Here it is also important to remember that the Church's faithfulness is imperfect because all Christians remain sinful. As Christ told the apostles, when you have done everything God commands, say that we have only "done what was our duty to do" (Lk 17:10). It is with this reminder that we are to hear Christ's commendation of our faithfulness, "Well done, good and faithful servant," as we enter by grace into His joy (Mt 25:21).

Faithful preaching, teaching, and practice do not always bring success in the eyes of the world, or even in the eyes of the Church. There are many examples of faithful preaching and teaching in contexts of foreign and domestic missions that did not produce the kind of increase seen in the parable. Christ's commendation is also for those who labored diligently and whose faithful use of their talents did not result in an increase.

It is also important to avoid the faulty notion that faithfulness always results in visible, tangible increases. That is a theology of glory. The Bible clearly teaches that the most faithful witness, Jesus Christ, perfectly and faithfully preached and taught God's Word. In the Capernaum synagogue, many people rejected His message. "Therefore many of His disciples, when they heard this, said, 'This is a hard saying; who can understand it?'" (Jn 6:60).

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From “that time many of His disciples went back and walked with Him no more” (Jn 6:66). Jesus, the sinless Savior of the world, was ultimately rejected and crucified even though He perfectly preached and taught.

God’s prophets in the Old Testament, like Jeremiah and Ezekiel, were faithful in their ministries, yet a great number of the Israelites rejected their preaching and teaching. There are other biblical examples of the rejection of faithful service in the Lord’s Kingdom. Thus, it is important to remember that Jesus’ parable of the talents encourages faithfulness in one’s life and service so that sinners remain in the faith for eternity. Faithful preaching and teaching are not ends in themselves. Faithfulness in faith and living is encouraged so that sinners will know the truth, for only the truth in Christ will set them free from sin and death (Jn 8:30–32). Faithful teaching is necessary to strengthen believers in the truths of God’s Word and to combat false teachings.

God tells His Church that His Word will not return void (it will always accomplish its purpose), either in the area of the Law or in the area of the Gospel (Is 55:9–11). God’s Word encourages faithfulness in preaching and teaching in accord with the Great Commission. And there is no doubt that there has been faithful preaching and teaching over the last fifty years. Still today, infants and adults are being baptized, sinners are brought to faith in Christ, souls are nurtured by the Gospel, faith is strengthened, sin is forgiven, Christians live their faith in word and deed, and God’s saints are translated to heaven’s glory. Why then has the church in America suffered loss?

Less Than Faithful

Has the Church also been less than faithful? To answer that question, several matters need to be examined. Here one must look both internally and externally—within the Church and outside of it. The history of God’s people in both the Old and New Testaments contains instances of faithfulness, as well as the lack thereof. The Children of Israel were not always faithful during their trek in the wilderness or as they lived in the Promised Land, nor were the apostles perfectly faithful in their lives and ministries. The only one perfectly faithful was and is Christ our Savior, whose grace redeems our lack of faithfulness.

Within the Church

Religious surveys indicate a lack of faithfulness in the beliefs actually held by some Christians today.

Ligonier Ministries Survey (2018)—Ligonier Ministries surveyed three thousand Americans and found that “1 in 3 evangelicals (32%)” hold that “religious belief is a matter of personal opinion [and] not about objective truth.” Fifty-two percent of

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evangelical Christians believe that most “people are basically good,” and 51 percent of evangelical Christians believe that “God accepts the worship of all religions.” Astoundingly, 71 percent of evangelical Christians believe that Jesus is “the first and greatest being created by God the Father”—an Arian heresy.³

Lutheran Faith Surveys

A Study of Generations (1972)—Fifty-nine percent of the Lutherans surveyed in this study believed that “the main emphasis of the Gospel is on God’s rules for right living,” and “two out of five Lutherans believed in salvation by works.”⁴

Lutheran Brotherhood Survey (1998)—Forty-eight percent of the Lutherans surveyed agreed with this statement: “People can only be justified before God by loving others.” Sixty percent of those surveyed agreed with this statement: “The main emphasis of the Gospel is God’s rules for right living.” And 56 percent believe that “God is satisfied if a person lives the best life one can.”⁵

The survey concluded by stating:

Many Lutherans are no longer anchored to a core set of beliefs. On topics ranging from original sin, to the Trinity, to justification, to the Gospel, to the place of Scripture in one’s life, many Lutherans tend to either misunderstand or disagree with the historic teachings of the Lutheran Church. . . . The research suggests that more time and attention be given to addressing what it means to be Lutheran not only among those on the periphery of the church, but also among those who regularly participate in Lutheran worship services.⁶

Books like those written by Bryan Wolfmüller, Ross Douthat, Michael Horton, Christian Smith, and others have illustrated this downturn in faithfulness in Christian beliefs.⁷ These books and other such materials are evidence of the need for the Church to preach and teach the faith once delivered to the saints accurately and faithfully so that believers know the truth and are equipped to believe, live, and share it.

Outside the Church

A number of societal trends are intertwined with this downturn in adherence to historic Christian doctrine. These societal trends have had an impact on the Church’s faithfulness. They include the rise of New Age religious views, Gnosticism, the rise of new religious movements (NRMs), a downturn in respect for authority, the dramatic rise in individualism and of spirituality versus religion, the lack of sound catechesis, scientism, militant atheism, nihilism, globalization, and other factors.⁸

Atheistic antagonism towards religious faith has been on the rise since the time of the Renaissance.⁹ This antagonism appears somewhat parallel to the antagonism of the one servant toward his master in the parable of the talents (Mt 25:24–26). Already at

the time of the Renaissance, people exhibited “tolerance toward other religions” and believed “that there is more than one way to God.” This view “minimized the historical uniqueness of Christianity.”¹⁰

Renaissance Humanism was a forerunner of the Enlightenment, an era that felt itself to be “superior to” the past and self-consciously turned “to the new.” Humanism found its “center” in “man” rather than in God. It “[was] deeply marked by a pronounced spiritual, moral, and . . . religious secularization.” It criticized “the ecclesiastical,” for the ecclesiastical is “missing the living spirituality” that Humanism “believes it possesses.” Today still, Humanism emphasizes an “inner righteousness” centered in human beings rather than a righteousness coming from God.

The impact of Christ’s saving work was minimized. Thus, for Humanism, “all the higher religions become more or less of equal value. . . . Grace [was] moved to the periphery.”¹¹

Antagonism to Christianity has also been fueled by some Eastern belief systems. Buddhism has often depicted Christianity as “violent, intolerant, and irrational,” and some have gone further in an attempt to show Buddhism’s “superiority over Christianity.” This perspective has wide appeal for “countercultural seekers.”¹²

A recent article in *First Things* stated that “the prevailing climate of opinion” in our time “regards obedience to the will of God as servility.”¹³

Some aspects of globalization are closely linked with other societal trends, including an “increasing emphasis on individual autonomy, self-expression and free choice,” and an “increasing emancipation from authority.”¹⁴ There are six “interlinked processes of religious change related to globalization.” There is the movement (1) away from viewing one’s religion or spirituality as exclusively correct, (2) away from dogmatic belief, (3) away from seeing oneself as part of an authoritative religious group, (4) away from seeing religion hierarchically/salvation exclusive to one’s religion, (5) away from centering religious belief in God, and (6) away from looking at religion with a view to the afterlife. Globalization influences one to view religion or spirituality (1) eclectically, (2) experientially, (3) individually/private, (4) in an egalitarian way (salvation in all beliefs), (5) as being radically centered in human beings and secularized, and (6) in an almost pure this-worldly view.¹⁵ As one author noted, NRMs “sprout from globalization like plants from the earth.”¹⁶

These trends have had a significant negative impact on organized religion, including Christianity. A faithful response to the issues seen in this essay would be serious study of the effects of globalization on religion to see both its negative and possible positive effects. Christian theologians, pastors, and laity should also study the trends that have given rise to alternative religions, the teachings of alternate spiritualities, and NRMs. There is also the need for diligent catechesis to ground Christians firmly in the truths of Scripture to offset these negative influences.¹⁷

Knowledge of these teachings and the underlying philosophy and ideas giving rise to them, as well as further grounding in the truths of Scripture, will be used by the Holy Spirit to enable effective ways for Christians to respond to, and evangelistically engage, those adhering to these religions and spiritualities.

Response

That the Missouri Synod is attempting to respond to these trends is evident in the book, *The Christian Difference* (CPH, 2019). The guide to the use of the book states that it is a “powerful resource” with which to study the faiths of our “neighbors, family members, and co-workers” in order to find areas “where we can more efficiently share the hope” that we have in Jesus Christ with Jews, Muslims, Mormons, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Scientologist, atheists, agnostics, the spiritual but not religious, Hindus, Buddhists, Confucianists, Shintoists, and the Sikhs.¹⁸ Knowledge of the basic tenets of different faith systems is gained in order to enable more effective witnessing.

The Christian Difference also contains an extensive chapter on the Christian faith that emphasizes the need for a firm accurate grounding in the truths of Christianity to equip one to witness effectively.¹⁹

Being knowledgeable about different faith systems is also the emphasis of the Synod’s new evangelism effort: *Everyone His Witness*. Specific modules are being designed to help Christians witness to disaffected adult children, Muslims, Jews, adherents of scientism, Buddhists, Scientology, the occult, and other groups.

Addressing the similarities and differences in belief between Christian denominations was also one of the emphases of the Bible studies under CPH’s *The Lutheran Difference* series²⁰ and a book by the same title that turned the Bible studies into essays.²¹ The purpose of these resources is to equip baptized Christians with the knowledge and resources that will help them verbalize the love of God in Christ to others, even family members, in their own context, language, style, and circumstance.

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Conclusion

The evidence indicates that the Church, comprising justified sinners, will exhibit both faithfulness and a lack of faithfulness in its corporate life until the end of time. That the visible church is *simul justus et peccator* is evident in the parable of the

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talents. Thus, Christians need to live daily in contrition and repentance, to see their faithfulness to biblical teachings and practice, and recognize their failures. This self-examination, having revealed the lack of faithfulness, will enable the members of the Church to address that lack in a godly way. This daily exercise is needed to keep the message straight and to get the message out so that souls

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are saved. It is solely by God’s grace that the Church exhibits faithfulness, and only God’s grace can forgive our lack of faithfulness. The grace that God gives, He gives for the eternal salvation of lost souls.

“Be faithful unto death and I will give you the crown of life” (Rev 2:10 NKJV).

Endnotes

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