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Matthew 25:14-30:

“What Would You Like to Do Now That Christ Has Done Everything Required?”

- I. Are Good Works Really Necessary?
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Pilgrim Lutheran Church
2155 N. Oakland Avenue
Decatur Illinois 62526

“What would you like to do now that Christ has done everything required?”

Text: Matthew 25:14-30

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ,

Dr. Steven A. Hein wrote in his book, *The Christian Life: Cross or Glory?*

“To be grasped in the freedom of the Gospel is to face a new question: *What would you like to do now that Christ has done everything required?* The freedom of the gospel creates a whole new agenda that arises from finally being grasped by the reality that we do not *have to* do anything and thus are free to be and do what we are in Christ. As a new creation in Christ, the necessity of good works is beside the point!”

In the Christian walk, we are facing a difficult-to-grasp paradox. In the scriptures, we have before us both the Law and the Gospel, two concepts that cannot be mixed or mingled and must be understood properly to understand the essence of the faith. On the one hand, we have the Law, which, as you prayerfully learned or will learn in confirmation, accuses and condemns the guilty sinner. It serves three functions as a curb, mirror, and guide. It keeps the sinful nature in check, shows us our sin and lack of ability to please God by our own merits, and empowers believers by the gospel truth to desire to live a life pleasing to God. On the other hand, we have the Gospel that frees us from sin and death and, without the works of the Law, makes us righteous in the sight of God the Father for Christ’s sake.

I. Are Good Works Really Necessary?

Most Christians, at one point or another, ask themselves or their pastor this question regarding this paradox: Are good works of the Law really necessary? Before we get into our gospel lesson, the Parable of the Talents, let’s take a moment to dissect this question. In 1st Corinthians 3:11-15, the apostle Paul has this to say,

“For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw—each one's work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire.”

These difficult words shine a light on an important subject that is often neglected in churches today. Let’s ask the question again: Are good works really necessary? The answer is this: Yes and no! The Lord God has declared that you are a new creation in Christ and that by no merit of your own, you are free from sin and inheritors of eternal life. It is also declared in Matthew 5:19, “Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven...” So, which is it then? Do we or do we not have something to do now that Christ has done everything required?

The key to answering this question is in the intention of the one asking. Why might we be asking such a question? Are we asking because we want to justify our slothfulness toward the commands of God? If you fall into this camp, you may be like the third man in the gospel lesson for today who hid his talent.

II. One Very Important Talent

In The Parable of the Talents, one might look at the master of these servants as a cruel master. Not only did he give one worker the same pay for bringing less than the other, but he also shamed and cast out the worker who buried the talent and did not bring back anything but the buried talent! A thought like this fails to take into consideration what Jesus was saying regarding this one talent given. It was not just some ordinary talent, but in this parable, it represents the free gift of salvation given to us by Christ on the cross. Christ is the master, and we, as Christians, are His servants. We are graciously given one talent for free. It is the most valuable talent of all: the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ for the satisfactory atonement of the world's sins.

Christ assesses a person's heart according to his or her commitment to what they have received while considering their circumstances. He is not an evil master, but rather, he is a fair and honest judge. And so, on account of that, we must not take this free gift lightly. To neglect this gift like the third servant, to bury this talent, ultimately results in a rejection of that which has been graciously given. It is to be a justifier of slothful and willful ignorance toward the commands of God. The result of this rejection is precisely what our text says. It is to be cast away as a "worthless servant into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." The man who returned with only one talent did not use his gift. As the old childhood song goes, he hid his faith under a bushel. Unlike his fellow servants, it produced nothing and did nothing and, therefore, was not faith. So yes, we do have something to do.

III. Bring Back Many Talents!

But perhaps we don't fall into this category of a person who asks about the necessity of good works to justify our sin. What if, rather than asking the question for nefarious deeds, we ask the question in guilt and sorrow? Suppose you are truly and honestly asking this question in this way. Excellent! The Law has done its job and accused you. It has humbled you with a proper fear of God. It has brought you to your knees in repentance. What you need now is to be directed to the sweet words of the Gospel.

This free gift of Christ that we have been talking about is given to all of humanity. John 3:16 is clear, "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." The world includes everyone on this planet, whether they believe in Christ or not. However, it is by faith alone that we receive this talent. By faith, we obtain the forgiveness of sins and eternal life. Our faith is that which accepts God's verdict of justification for Christ's sake. Faith does not justify because it is a good work or a God-pleasing virtue. Faith is not our work or an accomplishment that affects our justification before God at all. Instead, Christ's work is set against God's wrath rather than our merits or love. So no, we don't have anything to do.

Here we are back at square one with Steven Hein's essential question. Rather than asking about the necessity of good works, the question remains, "*What would you like to do now that Christ has done everything required?*" The answer should be something to the effect of this: *Now that Christ has done everything required, I want to follow the commands of my gracious, loving, and merciful God!* As children of God, we have been freed from the bondage of sin and made slaves of Christ. As R.C.H. Lenski put in his commentary on Matthew, "We are slaves of Jesus Christ, and that may sound as if he profited off of our labor; but think of what it cost Him to elevate us to the position of being His slaves: the price of his own blood!" Because God has loved us beyond measure to redeem us, we, in response, love Him and are given the ability by the Holy Spirit to do good works in a paradox of reason where we do it not just because it is commanded but because we should want to! As a new creation in Christ, the paradox of having to do the law and wanting to do the law goes hand in hand as we respond to His love for us.

2nd Peter 1:3-8 has this to say,

"His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire. For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ."

The Lord has given His people their gifts and abilities in their walks of life. These are abilities that are given to us to witness to Christ. They place us where we need to be and when we need to be there according to God's divine will. We are called as children of God to supplement our faith and the faith of those around us in our respective vocations. With the gift given to us in the death and resurrection of Christ, we are empowered not to forget that we have been cleansed from our sins but to practice these qualities. Like the first two servants, by the work of the Spirit, one should be witnessing to the same love that has been given to us in our day-to-day lives using the gifts given to us that produce the fruits of faith. Faith should produce in us a want to use our one free talent to bring back many talents!

IV. And Yet, We Still Fall Short.

And yet, we still fall short of using the gift of salvation. We can say for hours on end that we are using this gift given to us in a God-pleasing way. But what do we see when we look at the fruits of our labor? What do we see when we honestly ask ourselves what we have done with this free gift of salvation? When did you last talk about Jesus with someone you care about? How often at work do you talk about your faith? When was the last time a devotion happened amongst your family? Do you put the title of Christian before or after the titles of father or mother, brother or sister, or boss or employee? The result of these questions is often a harsh moment of self-

examination. It can be a moment that reveals our tendency to hide our salvation, like the third servant in the parable. Or it can reveal a hiding of our salvation to lose it because we want to justify sin.

My friends in Christ, I encourage you not to neglect the gift you have been given. To accept that God wishes all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth means that we are bound to our neighbors (though there is no liberty from sin in that bondage). The harsher part to grasp is that this includes our enemies. Steven Hein put it this way: “The Christian is directed to channel his efforts in faithful living toward meeting the ordinary temporal needs of his neighbors as they are commonly encountered where they live, work, and play.” This direction is not based upon a supernatural and easily observable ability given to us. Instead, it is found in the mundane and based on the status of every individual according to his station in life. As I said earlier, Christ assesses a person’s heart according to his or her commitment to what they have received while considering their circumstances. Do not hide your talent. Instead, take hold of what has been given to you in repentance and, in faith in the forgiveness of sins, be a vessel of the Holy Spirit so that those who do not know of such a wonderful gift may, in turn, have the same joy and hope that Christ’s love has given you.

The apostle Paul put it best in Ephesians 4 when he said,

“Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another. Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil. Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need. Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.”

Amen.