

Using Fear To Motivate

Today's reading from the Gospel of Matthew tells of three servants of a long ago master who before leaving on a trip gives them talents (money) to invest while he is away – so that when he returns he will be richer than when he left. The distributions are from five to two to one – based on what?? Anyway, when he returns the first two servants show a profit while the last one shows none, saying: "*Master, I knew you were a demanding person, . . . so out of fear I went off and buried your talent in the ground.*"

Insofar as the master is here described as a *demanding person* – and even ruthless, considering that the text says he threw the unprofitable servant *into the darkness outside, where there will be wailing and grinding of teeth*, who is to say that the other profitable servants were not *also motivated by fear*? But rather than keeping their money intact, they scrambled like crazy to increase their shares rather than face the rage of their master upon his return.

Fear gets results! Ask any Marine recruit! Indeed fear of hunger, loss of shelter, the cold, the elements in general generates so much of the energy that drives people to get up in the morning. It got results out of me way back during my graduate school days – and even in the earlier stages of my education. Bored with so much schooling I turned in a slipshod term paper to my Scripture prof one day – and was surprised to get a phone call directly from him saying (in Teutonic tones): *If this is the best you can do, drop out of the class and stop wasting my time and yours.* I made haste to my typewriter to assuage his anger and improve my grade. I'm sure that, if you are human, you have had similar experiences regarding motivation.

And considering that Matthew follows this parable with his ominous description of the Last Judgment at which Christ returns – like this master – to settle accounts with the nations of the world - Matthew's intent does seem to have been to motivate believers to worry about their fate hereafter – if found to be unprofitable servants.

Yet scholars hold that this parable among others existed and was used in the early Church well prior to Matthew's adapting it to his Gospel. Which raises the question: what was the intent of the parable before Matthew got hold of it? Some scholars (and I would agree with them) suggest that this parable began as a Christian critique of the way sermonizers, whatever their creed, motivated their congregations, using worry, anxiety to generate correct behavior, for example: TV preachers who motivate their listeners with threats of being left behind when the "rapture" occurs.

Scholars also say that Matthew was initially writing for a Jewish Christian audience who were used to the old Law's emphasis on correct behavior or else! And so we read in Matthew sayings like: *Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets . . . and Be perfect as God is perfect* – a saying of Jesus that Luke's Gospel translates rather as *Be merciful as God is merciful.* And indeed it is mercy –grace - that the New Testament declares can change mere moral *labor* into an *art*.

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