

What Do You See?

The 1992 comedy film *My Cousin Vinny* begins with an error: While on a road-trip through the American south, two New Yorkers, Stanley Rothenstein and William Gambini forget to pay for a can of tuna at the Sack-O-Suds convenience store. Shortly after they leave, the store is held-up at gunpoint, and the clerk is killed with a 357 magnum revolver.

When the two youths are taken into custody, they confess to what they think is the misdemeanor of neglecting to pay for groceries, only to find that the prosecutor is charging them with first-degree murder.

Unable to afford representation and disconcerted by the public defender, they ask William's cousin, Vincent LaGuardia Gambini, who has recently passed the bar and never tried a case, to represent them in their capital trial.

The townspeople doggedly hold to what they believe to be the truth as Vinny systematically confronts them over their misperceptions. He uses the cooking time of grits to discredit a witness convinced that only a few minutes had passed since he saw the defendants enter the store and when the murder happened. He used a tape measure and two fingers to demonstrate to another witness that her eyeglasses prescription was woefully out of date. He decimates the testimony of a third witness whose line of sight to the Sack-O-Suds was fully compromised.

His entire defense strategy is based on the premise that perpetrators driving a second, identical mint green 1964 Buick Skylark entered the Sack-O-Suds a few minutes after the defendants and committed the crime.

Finally, he calls to the stand his fiancé, Mona Lisa Vito, as an expert in general automotive knowledge to assess whether or not his defense holds water.

In an Oscar-winning moment, she examines a photo of the tire-tracks made by the escaping vehicle. Her eyes widen as her *perception* changes. Ms. Vito then destroys his defense and destroys the prosecution at the same time, because the tire-tracks were made by a car with *positraction*, an automotive development that the 1964 Buick Skylark did not have, asserting that in the sixties, there were only two cars made in America that had positraction and the power necessary to make the tire-tracks: A Corvette, which could never be confused with a Buick Skylark, and the 1963 Pontiac Tempest, which had the same height, length, width, weight, and wheel-track as the 1964 Buick Skylark, and was also offered in metallic mint-green.

The film is a masterclass in *misperceptions*.

Sometimes what we *see* is not the truth.

A 2022 article in *Psychology Today* asserts that discrepancies in how couples remember events are shaped by what is termed *memory chauvinism*: The assertion that one partner's memory is superior to their spouse's.

The article asserts however, that the truth is more complex, “What we recall and how we recall it depends on current mental and physiological states and environmental conditions. When sad, stressed, tired, hungry, resentful, anxious, perceiving ego-threats, or in an overheated room, we’re likely to recall negative aspects of events. When we’re interested, relaxed, comfortable, and feeling OK about ourselves, we’re likely to recall positive aspects. Of course, partners have different metabolisms, comfort levels, and, most of the time, differing mental states.”¹

Sometimes what we *are so sure of* is not the truth.

We can *see* a lot of wrong things in the parable of the talents. For instance, the parable has nothing to do with innate abilities. A talent is nothing more than a sum of money, a large sum at that. But oftentimes, a preacher simply cannot resist the urge to associate the ancient term with its modern cognate, and so sermons are preached asserting that we *all* have a talent that we can bring to bear for the good of the Gospel. Most of us may not be able to play the organ but we can all bring our gifts to the church. We can teach Sunday School, or put together a luncheon, or greet guests with a cheery *hello*.

While this is a true statement, and one worth of considering as we commit our treasure to the spread of the Gospel and the good of our common life, it has nothing to do with this text. Matthew is just talking about a sum of money.

Likewise, we might *see* this parable as being about commitment, and that would certainly be a convenient take when we are invited think about *why* we give, and certainly we have immersed ourselves in gratitude over these last weeks: Remembering how God has brought us thus far along the way, giving thanks for the sacrifices of our forebears that made this congregation what we are today, in this blessed and beautiful place. All of these are noble thoughts, necessary to our common life together, but despite the fact that the object lesson in this parable uses *money* to make its point, this isn’t a parable about the tithe.

We might even use this parable to question or reinforce notions about *haves* and *have-nots*. In a time with the divisions between levels of wealth in society seems so very corrosive to community, it is not a bad thing for Christians to ask questions of ourselves about why things are the way they are in the world, but neither is this what the parable is about.

Nor is it even particularly about the burial of the talent. The late Eduard Schweizer writes, “Rabbinical law says that whoever immediately buries property entrusted to him is no longer liable because he has taken the safest course conceivable.”²

This is a parable about what we *see*.

Stanley Hauerwas writes, “The one who received one talent feared the giver. He did so because he assumed that the giver had given a gift that could only be lost or used up. In other words, the one with one talent assumed that he or she was a part of a zero-sum game. Those

¹ <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/anger-in-the-age-entitlement/202208/why-your-partner-remembers-things-differently-you>

² Eduard Schweizer, *The Good News According to Matthew*. (JKP: Atlanta, 1975) p471

who assume that life is a zero-sum game think that if one person receives an honor then someone else is made poorer. So the slave with one talent feared losing what he had been given with the result that he tried to turn the gift into a possession. In contrast, the first two slaves recognized that to try to secure the gifts they had been given means that the gifts would be lost. The joy of the wedding banquet and the joy into which the master invites his slaves that had not tried to protect what they had been given is the joy that comes from learning to receive a gift without regret.”³

Still other scholars rightly quiz this parable, “Is there anything in this text to support the one-talent servant’s assertion that the giver is harsh and cruel?”

The giver freely handed over massive sums of money. Upon receiving the dividends, the giver essentially said to the five-talent servant and the two-talent servant, “Come into my house, we’ll set another place at the table. We are glad you are here.”

But the one-talent servant saw *none* of that.

What he saw was *not the truth*.

When we can see the goodness of God, we are apt to see goodness and generosity everywhere we look.

And when what we see is *scarcity... judgment... harshness...* we are apt to see that everywhere we look.

Those who perceive God’s grace will see it everywhere.

Those who see only harshness will see it everywhere.

Years ago, I heard a sermon by Tom Long, who will be preaching here in December, in which he interpreted this parable through the lens of Matthew 6, part of the Sermon on the Mount, *The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light; but if your eye is unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!*⁴

As I have often said, if we get *God* wrong, it’s very hard to get much else right.

It matters what we see!

There is so much that can conspire to rob us of the perspective of God’s goodness: The inhumanity of wars raging at this very moment and the hoarding of resources that could elevate billions of souls out of abject poverty. Naturally, there are things that are well beyond what we may control: The cruel progression of diseases that degrade the body and shorten life and natural disasters that exacerbate already hard lives.

It is possible to look at life, and to see only these things.

But to do so is to misperceive the fullness of what God has given us.

Humankind is capable of tremendous generosity.

³ Stanley Hauerwas, Matthew in *Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible*. (Brazos: Grand Rapids, 2006) p210

⁴ Matthew 6:22-23

The earth hungers to yield its plenty, and there is not a scrap of creation that is not given by God to delight and to sustain us.

And of course, as we are talking about the parables of Jesus, there is also the *life* of Jesus for us to consider.

It comes down to what we see.

Sometimes, corrective lenses are required.

Schweizer further notes that this is a parable of *responsibility*. He writes, "The parable is aimed at those devoted to their own personal security, devoted to the vindication of their own righteousness, rather than being devoted to God, *which means being devoted to other people, taking active (and risky) steps to help them.*"⁵

I am reminded of a favorite rabbinical tale, of two brothers in the business of milling wheat. Side-by-side the brothers worked their land, storing the fruits of their labor each night. Side-by-side, piles of wheat grew for each of them in equal measure as their labors prospered.

One night, one of the brothers tossed and turned. He thought to himself, "There is no justice in this. My brother and I receive the same amount of wheat for our labors, and yet our needs are not the same. He has a family to support. I must do something. It is only wheat, but I can share it where it is needed." And under the cover of darkness, he crept into their storehouse and shoveled wheat from his pile to his brother's.

At the same time, his brother could not sleep. "This is not right," he muttered "This is not just. I have a wife, and children. And yet, our shares are always equal. This must be addressed! My brother does not have the blessing of a family, so as little as this material wealth is, I must correct this." Sneaking into the storehouse under the cover of darkness, he shoveled wheat from his pile into his brother's.

Each marveled in the light of day that their supply of wheat never seemed diminished.

As stories inevitably unfold, eventually, they met in the night, and with tears of joy, as each discovered what the other had been doing, they collapsed into embrace.

Rabbis say that in this moment, God declared, "This is where my temple will be built, that my house may always be a house of *joy*."

What do you *see*?

In the light of faith, we may see the goodness – the *joy* – of God.

If we get God right, we may see a world full of generosity, humanity, all the good gifts that God would give us.

If we can see all of this, perhaps we may be of service to those who cannot.

Because I have a strong hunch that the best way to aid in the healing of those who are so wounded by life that they can no longer see the goodness of God is a simple action:

We will have to *show* them what we see.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.

⁵ Schweizer, p472. *Emphasis mine*.