

The title of this morning's sermon is, "*The Parable of the Unprofitable Servant.*"ⁱ

On Sunday mornings we're working our way through Luke's gospel verse by verse, and we find ourselves at **Luke 17:7**.

I pole vaulted in high school. As you can guess you get better each year, so we were excited for my senior year. When the season was approaching Dad took me down to the track to practice. I felt bad about him having to stand around while I warmed up, so I decided I wouldn't warm up that day. I jumped on the runway and was racing toward the box for my first vault when I felt a painful tear in my hamstring.

I thought the best way to heal it was to do as little as possible. It would start to feel better, but every time I ran on it the pain returned. I repeated this all season. The highest height I cleared was two feet lower than my highest height the year before.

Sometime later I was sharing about the injury with someone, and he said, "*You should have been lightly jogging on it to get blood flowing. Blood is healing, which is why a papercut take so long to heal: there's little blood. A jagged cut that bleeds will always heal much faster.*"

Fast forward to my junior year of college. At that time Florida Tech didn't have a tackle football program. Instead, they had a flag football program that I participated in each year. We had the All-Star game at the end of the season, and believe it or not, someone forgot to bring the flags. Not wanting to disappoint everyone who came out to watch, we decided to play tackle...with no pads, helmets, or any protective gear.

I ended up severely separating my shoulder, and everyone knew my ROTC career was in jeopardy. The injury was on Wednesday, I took an emergency flight home on Thursday, which was Thanksgiving Day, and on Friday my parents had me meeting with an orthopedic surgeon. I had surgery within a few days, did the rehab at home in California through the rest of the fall semester and Christmas vacation. Then I returned to Florida for spring semester, and I had to complete my 18 credits from fall semester with my 18 credits from spring semester, which gave me 36 credits along with my ROTC responsibilities.

When I was talking with the orthopedic surgeon, he said that the reason the injury was so bad was the tendons and ligaments ripped off the bones versus tearing in the middle. This surprised me, because I thought that sounded good: all the ligaments and tendons were still together. He said, "*No, this is the worst kind of tear because there's no blood it tears off the bone. If it had torn in the middle, there would've been blood and it would heal faster.*" I thought, "*This sounds familiar.*"

Now fast-forward twenty years to December 2020 and I am lying in bed unable to move because of my sciatic pain. I was doing my best not to move so that I could heal, but even though I denied it for a few weeks, it was clear that I was getting worse. After one month of hardly moving I started watching some YouTube videos and all the doctors said the same thing: "*When you have a lower back injury you need to slowly and carefully move around. The worst thing you can do is not move at all, because the muscles in your lower back will atrophy worsening your condition.*"

I told Katie, "*Everything I'm reading says that I need to get up and move around.*" Because I couldn't stand up without pain, say nothing about walking around, my dear wife – and I'm not kidding – almost in tears said, "*No, please don't. I'm begging you. Your situation is different. They are probably talking about lower back pain, but this is your sciatica. Just stay in bed the rest of today and tomorrow and let's see if you feel better.*"

I listened to Katie, stayed in bed another day or two...and felt even worse. That's when I decided to get up and slowly shuffle around, which turned into small steps, and even though it was painful at first, that's when I started to feel better. I even went outside for a 45-minute walk. I'm sure I looked like an old man, but I was thrilled to be up and around. That was the beginning of my recovery. Since then, whenever I have lower back or sciatica issues, I try to make sure I walk around versus sitting down.

If you're familiar with people in the hospital, you probably know they try to get people up and around as soon as possible. The worst thing is for them to stay in bed and do nothing.

If you ever deal with people who are struggling with depression the best thing you can do is get them up and around. The worst thing is for them to stay in bed and do nothing. It usually makes their depression worse, which makes them want to lie around even more, and the cycle continues.

I could give you other examples, but you get the point:

- God has made us to be active and busy serving Him and others.
- This is how we heal and are strengthened physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually.

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Now at this point you're probably listening and thinking, *"Okay, Pastor Scott is going to be preaching about the importance of serving."*

Not quite. Serving is important, and I have always been thankful we have so many servants in our church.

But we have reached some verses that help us with the danger we face when we are active and serving.

Let me say like this...

Can anyone think of a temptation we might face when serving the Lord faithfully?

Pride!

We could start to think...

"I'm up and around. I've got blood flowing. I am so busy serving God, He must be thrilled with me. If He spoke to me, He would probably tell me how impressed He is with all I am doing for Him."

Sin has tainted every area of our lives so much that even when we are serving God our flesh tempts us to be proud. And there's not much that's uglier than spiritual pride.

Spiritual pride is a denial of God's grace in our lives:

- We might not deny God's saving grace, which is to say, we might not deny that we are saved by grace through faith.
- But we might deny God's sanctifying grace, which is to say, we might deny the grace that sanctifies us and allows us to serve Christ and become more like Him.

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This sounds pretty discouraging, but now I have some good news for you...

If this ever starts to happen to you – if you ever start to feel proud because of how well you're serving the Lord – turn to these verses and you will be brought back down to earth. There is no other place in Scripture that can so quickly convince us that whatever we are unprofitable servants.

With that in mind, look with me at **verse 7**...

Luke 17:7 "Will any one of you who has a servant plowing or keeping sheep say to him when he has come in from the field, 'Come at once and recline at table'?"

The Greek word for servant is [doulos](#), which is often translated as servant or bondservant, but it means slave.

And Jesus is describing someone who really served:

- Plowing was hard work physically. It was exhausting.
- Tending sheep could also be hard work because sheep are foolish. It required constant patience and attentiveness.

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There were times Jesus asked questions that expected answers, but this verse is not one of them. This is a rhetorical question because everyone knows the answer.

When the servant comes in from the field, the master is not going to say...

“You have done so much. You must be exhausted. Come on in and sit down. Take a load off. Relax. Put your feet up.”

Instead, look at **verse 8** to see what the master would say...

Luke 17:8 Will he not rather say to him, ‘Prepare supper for me, and dress properly, and serve me while I eat and drink, and afterward you will eat and drink’?

The master has quite a few other things to say instead...

“Why don’t you get my meal ready for me. You have been plowing in the field and you’re covered with dirt, and you tended the sheep so you smell like them. Please change your clothes and get cleaned up to prepare food. While I am eating and drinking you serve me, but when I’m done you can get yourself something to eat and drink.”

When the servant comes in, he doesn’t rest, because there’s more work to do for the master.

And this brings us to lesson one...

Lesson One: The parable of the unprofitable servant teaches us we (Part One) always have more work to do for the master.

If the plowing is done and the shepherding is done, then we can leave the field and come into the house. But we don’t head into the living room to relax. We head into the bathroom to get cleaned up, and then we head into the kitchen to start preparing the meal. Then we head to the dining room to serve the meal, and wait on the master until he’s done eating.

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So, what is Jesus doing in these verses? Is He trying to teach us how to be good servants to earthly masters?

Doing what He says in these verses would make us good servants to earthly masters, but He is talking about our relationships with Him.

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Much of the imagery in these verses is used to describe our service to the Lord elsewhere in Scripture. For example, Jesus discusses plowing here and...

Luke 9:62 Jesus said to him, “No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”

Jesus discusses getting **dressed properly** in **verse 8**, but your Bibles might have a footnote that it means **gird yourself**, which is how it’s translated in some Bibles, such as the NKJV and KJV. It looks to what we should do, not physically, but mentally...

1 Peter 1:13 Gird up the loins of your mind, be sober, and rest your hope fully upon the grace that is to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

Jesus is teaching that following Him is hard, difficult work that never ends. We can never feel like we have done enough. There is little rest for faithful servants of Christ.

Imagine people who have served the Lord faithfully for decades:

- They could easily think they have done enough.
- They could believe they have reached a place they don't need to do more.
- They could be comfortable coming in from the field, collapsing in the living room, and putting up their feet.

But Jesus says, "Get in the kitchen and make me something to eat."

These verses are intended to prevent us from stopping serving Him before we should.

Dean Plumptre said, "*The disciples were looking for the crown of labor before their work was done. They were looking for the wreath of the conqueror before the battle was finished.*"

In other words, they had much more to do, and Jesus wanted them – and us – to keep going.

Next lesson...

Lesson One: The parable of the unprofitable servant teaches us we (Part Two) should prefer the master to ourselves.

Look at **verse 8** one more time and notice that it's all about the master...

Luke 17:8 Will he not rather say to him, 'PREPARE SUPPER FOR ME, and dress properly, and SERVE ME WHILE I EAT AND DRINK, and afterward you will eat and drink'?

It looks like it's all about the master...and it is.

At the end of the verse notice the master says, "**AFTERWARD you will eat and drink.**"

The master's pleasure comes before our own. We are to prefer Him to ourselves.

This is how we should live this life:

- We prefer the master to ourselves
- The question is not, "What do I want?"
- The question is, "What does Christ want?"
- We are not living for ourselves. We are living for Him.

At this point you're kind of wondering, "*What does the servant get for all of his service? Does the master reward him? Does he at least get a thank you?*"

Nope.

Look at **verse 9**...

Luke 17:9 Does he thank the servant because he did what was commanded?

When the servant comes in, the master doesn't:

- compliment him
- feed him
- serve him

- Or even thank him

This is another rhetorical question. Jesus knew His listeners knew that the master would NOT say, “*Thank you for doing everything you’re supposed to do.*”

This probably seems a little harsh to us, but it didn’t seem harsh to Jesus’s listeners. They knew the servant was not a volunteer. He was an employee. This is what he was paid to do, and **what was commanded**...as the verse says.

Kenneth Bailey studied life in ancient Middle Eastern villages, and he writes...

“In [our] technological age with a 40-hour work week, powerful labor unions, and time and a half for overtime, the world of this parable seems not only distant, but unfair. After a long, hard day in the field such a servant surely has earned the right to a little appreciation, some comforts, and a few rewards. But Jesus is building on a well-known and widely accepted pattern of behavior in the Middle East. The master-servant relationship and its ancient and modern expression implies acceptance of authority and obedience to that authority, and it's a matter of honor. Yet the outsider needs to be sensitive to the security that this classical relationship provides for the servant, and the sense of worth and meaning that is deeply felt on the part of a servant who serves a great man. These qualities of meaning, worth, security and relationship are often tragically missing from the life of the modern industrial worker. The servant offers loyalty, obedience, a great deal of hard work, but with an authentic Middle Eastern nobleman, the benefits mentioned above are enormous. Certainly no one in any Middle Eastern audience could imagine any servant expecting special honor after fulfilling his duty. The master is not indebted to him for having plowed the field or guarded the sheep. We're not even dealing with harsh hours imposed by an unfeeling master, but rather the normal expectation of a relatively short day's chores.”

In our lazy, selfish, entitled culture, the servant’s position might look unattractive, but – believe it or not – it looked very attractive to Jesus’s listeners.

There were day laborers who had to go out every day looking for work, hoping someone would hire them.

But this servant lived in his master’s house, and the owner cared for him and provided for him.

It is a fitting picture of our relationship with our master. We are His servants and He cares for us and provides for us.

And just to make it perfectly clear that this is about our relationships with Christ, look at **verse 10**...

Luke 17:10 So you also, when you have done all that you were commanded, say, ‘We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty.’”

Jesus directed it at us...and this brings us to the next part of the lesson...

Lesson One: The parable of the unprofitable servant teaches us we (Part Three) have never went above and beyond.

Have you ever had anyone try to impress you, but it wasn’t impressive? I don’t mean it wasn’t impressive because they seemed proud, or they were bragging. I just mean they thought they were doing something that impressed you, but you weren’t impressed.

Usually, we see this with children. I will give you some examples I kept thinking about this week as I was preparing the sermon.

When I was a schoolteacher, I would have yard duty. I would walk around the playground and the students would yell at me to watch the things they were doing:

- The students would play wall ball. They have a red bouncy ball that they hit it against the wall and you could rarely walk by without students yelling to you to watch how hard they were hitting it and how high they were getting it to bounce off the wall. Now of course out of the hundreds of times you watched students do this they were very impressed with how hard they hit the ball, but there wasn't one single time that you ever thought, "Wow, that's impressive."
- If you walked past the basketball court, it never failed that there would be a student who would stand far behind the three point line and yell at you to watch him throw the ball at the hoop. Not only would they never make it, most of the time they probably didn't even hit the backboard. But they wanted you to watch because they thought it was impressive.

One time Katie and I were at a party and there was a child who kept yelling at his parents to watch him jump in the pool. To be clear, that's what he was doing: jumping in the pool. He wasn't doing a:

- forward four and a half somersault in the tuck position
- forward two and a half somersault in the pike position
- forward one and a half somersault in the tuck position
- forward dive in the pike position
- He wasn't diving at all
- He wasn't even doing a cannonball. Even that would have been more impressive.

He was just jumping into the pool, and he yelled constantly for his parents to watch, because he thought it was impressive.

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This past week, a pastor friend of mine, Chris Law, flew out with his family from Wisconsin to visit his wife's parents in Silverdale. They own a trampoline park, and he asked me if I wanted to bring my family to see them and spend the day at the trampoline park.

That's how we spent my day off and we had a great time. You can probably guess that most of the time that Chris and I were walking around together we couldn't get very far without one of our children yelling, "Watch this!"

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Now, before you think I'm making fun of any of the children in these examples, I want to be clear that I'm not. They don't know better.

I am making fun of us, because we do know better, but we can still have this attitude of: "*Look at me. Did you see what I did.*"

- *I made it to church today*
- *I attended the prayer meeting*
- *I performed in the choir*
- *I attended the church workday*
- *I brought this person a meal*
- *I was the VBS director* – and by the way we do need a VBS director...just don't brag about it after.

We shouldn't serve Jesus with an attitude that expects Him to be impressed with us.

For unprofitable servants like us there must be no acting like Peter when he said...

Matthew 19:27 "See, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?"

Basically, Peter said, "*Look at everything we've done for you. We've given up everything. What are you going to do for us?*"

The truth is that it should seem strange that Jesus would thank us or reward us:

- Considering all we still have left to do

- Considering all He has done for us.
- Considering all we have done He empowered us to do anyway.

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Let me tell you one of the main reasons Jesus HAD TO preach this to the disciples...

He had to deliver them from the religious leaders' influence:

- They thought they were great.
- They thought they went above and beyond.
- They thought God was pleased with them and owed them because of their service and righteousness.

Jesus knew how much this teaching, or as Jesus called it elsewhere in the Gospels, leaven, had affected people.

So, He preached this to prevent His disciples from thinking similarly.

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We don't pat ourselves on the back and think that God's impressed and owes us any special rewards or favors.

The fact of the matter is:

- No matter what we've done
- No matter how well we've done it
- No matter how good it might look
- No matter how much it might impress others

We can always say with completely honesty, "I am an unprofitable servant."

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And let me be clear about why this IS NOT and IS the case...

It IS NOT the case:

- Because nobody has ever done anything impressive for the Lord:
- Or because nobody has ever sacrificed for the Lord
 - I think about people who have served as missionaries in Third World countries for decades
 - I think about people who have experienced terrible diseases and trials, and persevered through in Christ honoring ways
 - The more messages I receive from people in difficult marriages who remain faithful to their spouse, the more convinced I become of how honorable this is
 - I think about people who have been persecuted or martyred for their faith. I was reading about Richard Wurmbrand and all that he suffered for Christ. He was imprisoned, tortured, released, and then he headed back out to the field to be imprisoned and tortured again.

I would never say that these people didn't serve Christ in impressive, wonderful ways.

So how could these people still be unprofitable servants?

The answer is found in contrasting:

- Contrasting what they have done for Christ
- With what Christ has done for them

It isn't to say they haven't done great things for Christ. It is just to say that what Christ has done for them is that much greater.

Spurgeon said, *"What have we done for [Christ] compared with what he has done for us? Our service put beside Christ's is like one single grain of dust in comparison with the mighty orb of the sun."*

All the service that we could ever do for Christ pales in comparison to what He has done for us, so we always serve Christ with a deep sense of indebtedness.

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But here's what's shocking...

Our Master will thank us and reward us. He will look at our work and say...

Matthew 25:21 and 23 “Well done, good and faithful servant.”

If you write in your Bible, circle **verse 8** and write, “*Luke 12:37.*” Then go ahead and turn to **Luke 12**. We covered these verses...14 years ago.

Luke 12:35 “Stay dressed for action and keep your lamps burning, 36 and be like men who are waiting for their master to come home from the wedding feast, so that they may open the door to him at once when he comes and knocks. 37 Blessed are those servants whom the master finds awake when he comes. Truly, I say to you, HE WILL DRESS HIMSELF FOR SERVICE AND HAVE THEM RECLINE AT TABLE, AND HE WILL COME AND SERVE THEM.

Did you notice that **Luke 12:37** says the opposite of **Luke 17:7-8**?

Listen to them back-to-back:

- **Luke 17:7 “Will any one of you who has a servant...say to him...‘Come at once and recline at table’? 8 Will he not rather say, ‘Prepare supper for me, and dress properly, and serve me while I eat and drink, and afterward you will eat and drink’?”**
- **Luke 12:37 [Jesus] will dress himself for service and have them recline at table, and he will come and serve them.**

In **Luke 17** the master didn't let the servants recline at the table and He didn't serve them. Instead, he tells them to dress properly, or gird themselves, and serve Him.

But in these verses, it is the opposite. He finds the faithful servants and:

- Tells them to recline at the table
- He girds himself
- And He serves them.

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How do we reconcile these verses that say the opposite of each other? Are they contradicting each other?

No. instead, perfectly complement each other. The verses in **Luke 17** are about this life, but the verses in **Luke 12** are about the next life

- The verses in **Luke 17** are about looking forward to Christ's return and striving to be faithful servants until then.
- The verses in **Luke 12** are about when Christ HAS returned and what He does for those who have been faithful servants.

And this brings us to our last lesson...

Lesson Two: The master will serve those who faithfully served Him.

You almost wouldn't believe it if it wasn't written here: the master serves the servants.

In an unbelievable reversal, Jesus says that he will serve the servants who faithfully served him.

In **Luke 12:37** it is as though Jesus says:

- *You have worked hard...*
- *You have done such a good job...*
- *You sit down and relax, and I will serve you.*
- *After all you have done, now it is now my turn.*

But you're almost uncomfortable with this, aren't you, because it sounds like it contradicts so much of the sermon.

You're rightly saying...

"After all we have done for Jesus? More like after all he has done for us. We owe him our lives. We owe him our service. He doesn't owe us anything else."

This is true! I understand. I feel the same.

But this is what the text says, so this is what I preach to you.

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But maybe we shouldn't be that surprised, because it resembles one of the most famous accounts in the Gospels...

In **Luke 17** Jesus told us to gird ourselves to serve Him, but listen to what He did...

John 13:4 (NKJV) [Jesus] rose from supper and laid aside His garments, took a towel and girded Himself. 5 After that, He poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet, and to wipe them with the towel with which He was girded. 6 Then He came to Simon Peter. And Peter said to Him, "Lord, are You washing my feet?"

Peter was surprised to be served by His Master, and I'm sure we will be surprised too...but this is what we're told will happen.

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Let me conclude with this...

The attitude Jesus wants us to have in these verses is not the kind of false humility that says, "I'm no good at anything." Instead, it is simply recognizing how much more Christ has done for us. We think of the great sacrifice He made, and our greatest works pale in comparison.

When we think about all Christ has done for us, we recognize we are unprofitable servants, and we serve Him with grateful hearts that always feel indebted.

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If you have any questions about anything I've shared directly pray for you in any way I will be up front after service and it would be a privilege to speak with you. Let's pray.

ⁱ Done:

- EW
- Pulpit Commentary
- JM sermon