

To Seek and To Save the Lost

Unworthy Servants

Luke 17:7-10

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Unworthy Servants

Scripture

Does God owe you anything?

If you believe that God owes you anything, you may be unhappy when God fails to deliver. And even if God gives you what you want, you may still find something about which to complain.

You may be like the mother whose son was blown away by a tornado. The woman cried for help: "Please, Lord, bring back my boy! He's all I have. I'll do anything to get him back."

Suddenly her son fell from the sky, right at her feet, a little shaken, but safe and sound. But as the mother joyfully embraced her son, she noticed that something was missing, and so she glared up at the heavens and said, "He had a hat, Lord!"¹

Let me ask another question: Do you owe God anything?

If you are a Christian, you believe that you owe God *everything*. You understand that everything you have is a gift from God. And so you praise God and give thanks for his abundant mercies to you.

Jesus wanted his disciples to understand that God owes them nothing, and they owed him everything. Because of the abundant mercies of God, which are grounded in the salvation found in Jesus Christ, Jesus' disciples joyfully do their duty and give thanks to God for his abundant mercies to them.

Let's read about dutiful servants in Luke 17:7-10:

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’? ⁸Will he not rather say to him, ‘Prepare supper for me, and dress proper-

¹ This story is recounted by David P. Barrett, in *Perfect Illustrations for Every Topic and Occasion* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 2002), 48–49.

ly, and serve me while I eat and drink, and afterward you will eat and drink'? ⁹ Does he thank the servant because he did what was commanded? 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.'" (Luke 17:7-10)

Introduction

The Gospel of Luke is the story of life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. Luke has given us an incredible account of the life and ministry of Jesus.

In our study of Jesus' life in *The Gospel of Luke* we are in the final few weeks of his life. Jesus was on his last journey to Jerusalem. The closer he got to Jerusalem and his crucifixion, the more he taught his disciples about important aspects regarding Christian discipleship. Jesus wanted his disciples to display to the world the characteristics of those who were members of his kingdom.

The context for today's lesson is that Jesus had just warned his disciples regarding temptations to sin (Luke 17:1-3a). He warned them that grief would come to the one who tempts another to sin. He warned them of the terrible fate that awaits the one who causes another to stumble into sin. And he warned them to pay attention to themselves that they not lead anyone into sin.

Following these stern warnings, Jesus taught his disciples about forgiveness of sin (Luke 17:3b-4). They were to rebuke the sinner, forgive the repentant sinner, and forgive the repentant sinner repeatedly.

As a result, Jesus' disciples asked him to increase their faith so that they would be able to forgive the repentant sinner repeatedly (Luke 17:5-6).

Jesus then wanted to be sure that his disciples did not think that if they were fully obedient to his commands that

they somehow therefore merited special or divine favor. So, Jesus told his disciples the parable of a dutiful servant.

Lesson

The analysis of the parable of a dutiful servant in Luke 17:7-10 teaches us about the ideal attitude that a disciple should have in serving God.

Let's use the following outline:

1. The Required Action of a Dutiful Servant (17:7-9)
2. The Required Attitude by a Dutiful Servant (17:10)

I. The Required Action of a Dutiful Servant (17:7-9)

First, let's look at the required action of a dutiful servant.

The required action of a dutiful servant is to serve his master day and night.

Jesus asked three rhetorical questions that are answered with a no, a yes, and a final no. Of course Jesus had the relationship of slaves and masters in the ancient world in mind when he asked his three rhetorical questions that show the required action of a dutiful servant.

The first question is in verse 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 answer is of course no!

The second question is in verse 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 answer to this question is yes.

And the third question is in verse 9, **"Does he thank the servant because he did what was commanded?"**

And the answer to this question is no.

In the ancient world, it was simply unthinkable for a slave to sit and eat with his master. Only family members and invited friends ate meals together. Slaves had to serve their masters, and only after their masters had completed their meals were slaves allowed to eat.

Many of you have watched the popular TV show *Downton Abbey*. It is a show set in the early twentieth century with the upper class eating and living upstairs, with the servants working and serving from downstairs. Can you imagine what Old Lady Grantham would say if one of the servants from downstairs decided to sit down and have dinner upstairs with her and the family one evening? Or, even more outrageously, can you imagine Old Lady Grantham serving dinner to the servant? That would be highly improper. It is just not done!

And the reason is simple: It is a servant's job to serve. Masters do not serve their servants.

Now, perhaps some of you may have wondered about Jesus' last question in verse 9, "**Does the master thank the servant because he did what was commanded?**" It may strike you as bad manners not to say "Thank you!" to the servant for his service. Jesus' point, however, is not about manners or proper etiquette.

Jesus' point is about a servant's action regarding service. The required action of a dutiful servant is to serve his master day and night.

That brings us to our second point.

II. **The Required Attitude of a Dutiful Servant (17:10)**

And second, notice the required attitude of a dutiful servant.

The required attitude of a dutiful servant is to do his duty joyfully and with gratitude.

That is why Jesus said in verse 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.’ ”**

What may be a little confusing is the adjective **“unworthy”** in **“unworthy servants.”** We may think that Jesus means that the servant has no worth or value. Obviously, the servant does have worth to the master, and so that is not the emphasis here. Another way to translate the Greek adjective for **“unworthy”** (*achreios*) is “unmeritorious” or “unprofitable.”² When interpreted this way, Jesus is saying that a servant has no merit or profit of his own. In other words, a servant never gives his master a profitable return on his investment. He is simply doing what his master has commanded him to do.

Suppose you are gifted, skilled, and able to build a brand new car. You build a car that is able to travel 75 miles on each gallon of gasoline. If the car performs in such a way that it travels 75 miles per gallon, it would simply be performing as it is supposed to perform. That is how you designed the car.

Similarly, a servant is required to obey his master’s commands. When he obeys every single command of his master, he is simply performing as he is supposed to perform. There is nothing meritorious at all in doing what he is supposed to do.

And that is Jesus’ point. Even if a servant excels at serving, he is still a servant that is doing his service, and his master owes him nothing.

A recent *Reader’s Digest* article told of a 67-year-old man named Bill who had donated over 100 pints of blood over the years. No doubt many people owe their lives to this man’s kindness. Do you think that Bill’s service to his fellow man is meritorious in heaven?

Here’s what Bill thinks: “When that final whistle blows,

² James Strong, *A Concise Dictionary of the Words in the Greek Testament and The Hebrew Bible* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2009), 18.

and St. Peter asks, 'What did you do?' I'll just say, 'Well, I gave 100 pints of blood,' "

Bill says with a laugh, "That ought to get me in."

Bill was probably joking. But if he was serious, if he truly believes that his good deeds will give him a ticket to heaven, then he has perfectly articulated the gospel of merit, also known as the gospel of works.³

R. C. Sproul puts it this way, "Jesus' lesson is this: if God commands us to do something and we don't do it, we are in trouble. However, if we do do what he commands, that is not an occasion for boasting, for we have done no more than what was expected of us."⁴ God commands perfect obedience from us. When we do all that he has commanded us, we are simply doing our duty. That should be very clear to us.

R. C. Sproul continues, "There is no way that we can save up merits for ourselves. There is nothing more demeaning to the biblical ethic than the doctrine that emerged in the Middle Ages of works of supererogation, the gaining of excess merit by doing works that were defined by the church as being above and beyond the call of duty."⁵

To illustrate works of supererogation, let's suppose that you are a teacher. It is final exams, and you finish grading all your papers. You walk down the corridor and notice a colleague who is swamped, and so you walk in and grade half of his papers. Or, suppose you mow your lawn. You notice that your neighbor's lawn needs to be mowed as well, and so you mow his lawn too. These are examples of going above and beyond the call of duty. Now, in our culture there is generally some kind of reward for going above and beyond the call of duty. You may receive a pay raise or a promotion or a gift or some

³ See <http://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/1999/october/12041.html>.

⁴ R. C. Sproul, *A Walk with God: An Exposition of Luke* (Great Britain: Christian Focus Publications, 1999), 323.

⁵ R. C. Sproul, *A Walk with God: An Exposition of Luke*, 323.

kind of recognition for your work of supererogation. And, in one sense, there is nothing wrong with that in our culture.

The problem comes in when we deal with God in the same way. R. C. Sproul is helpful here. He says:

This was one of the great issues of the Protestant Reformation. Nobody can ever have excess merits, because we are commanded to be perfect, and nobody can be better than perfect. If we are perfect, we are only doing what God has commanded us to do. There is no surplus of profit beyond that, that would place God under some kind of indebtedness or obligation to thank us.⁶

The truth is that God does not owe us anything. There is nothing whatsoever that we can do that will earn or merit us favor with God. No matter how obedient we are and no matter how much we do, we are simply doing what God commands us to do. We are simply doing our duty.

And even the good that we do we can only do because of the grace of God. God enables us to do our duty. He enables us to do that which is pleasing and glorifying to him.

But we struggle so much with our own self-righteousness. Bishop J. C. Ryle said, "He that desires to be saved must confess that there is no good thing in him, and that he has no merit, no goodness, no worthiness of his own. He must be willing to renounce his own righteousness, and to trust in the righteousness of another, even Christ the Lord."⁷

We find it difficult to renounce our own self-righteousness. We find it difficult to affirm that whatever good we do, we are enabled to do it only by the grace of God. Martin Luther put it this way in a sermon he preached almost 500 years ago:

⁶ R. C. Sproul, *A Walk with God: An Exposition of Luke*, 323.

⁷ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on Luke*, vol. 2 (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1879), 228.

Even though we are in faith . . . the heart is always ready to boast of itself before God and say: “After all, I have preached so long and lived so well and done so much, surely he will take this into account.” . . . But when you come before God, leave all that boasting at home and remember to appeal from justice to grace I myself have been preaching [grace] for almost twenty years and still I feel the old clinging dirt of wanting to deal so with God that I may contribute something, so that he will have to give his grace in exchange for my holiness. Still I cannot get it into my head that I should surrender myself completely to sheer grace; yet this is what I should and must do.⁸

When prospective communicant members come before the Session in order to join the church, one of the questions we ask is, “If you were to die today and stand before God, and he were to say to you, ‘Why should I let you into my heaven?’ what would you say to him?” The right answer of course is, “I am trusting in Jesus alone for the gift of eternal life.” However, we sometimes get answers like, “God, you should let me into heaven because I am a good person.” Or, “Because I obey the Ten Commandments.” Or, “Because I try to live a good life.” All of these answers reflect a works-righteousness. And that will never get anyone saved and into heaven.

Interestingly, we discover that when we do surrender to the grace of God, that Jesus did what a master never does and makes himself the servant of our salvation. Knowing that we are incapable of saving ourselves, Paul said this of Jesus in Philippians 2:6-8: “Though he was in the form of God, [Jesus] did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on

⁸ Martin Luther, from “The Sum of the Christian Life,” a sermon preached at Worlitz, Nov. 24, 1534.

a cross.” And he did this in order to save his people.

Jesus is the worthy servant. He died on the cross, and three days later the Father raised him back to life – a sign that he had accepted his sacrifice on behalf of sinners. Forty days later Jesus ascended into heaven where he welcomes saints into heaven to sit down and enjoy the heavenly banquet with him.

When Jesus invites us to sit down with him and enjoy the heavenly banquet, it is not because we deserve it. No. Jesus invites us to sit down with him because of his amazing grace. When we receive this amazing grace, it becomes our joy to say what Jesus taught his disciples to say, **“We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty.”** As Philip Ryken said:

This is not false modesty; it is a plain statement of the truth. It is a joy for us to say it because it means that none of the credit goes to us; it all goes to God in Christ. How little we have done for Jesus – infinitely less than he deserves. But how much he has done for us on the cross, through the empty tomb, and every day that we live under his loving care.⁹

Conclusion

Therefore, having analyzed the parable of a dutiful servant in Luke 17:7-10, we should joyfully do our duty and give thanks to God for his abundant mercies to us.

German pastor Martin Rinkhart served in the walled town of Eilenburg during the horrors of the Thirty Years War of 1618-1648. Eilenburg became an overcrowded refuge for the surrounding area. The fugitives suffered from epidemic and famine. At the beginning of 1637, the year of the Great Pestilence, there were four ministers in Eilenburg. But one aban-

⁹ Philip Graham Ryken, *Luke*, 223.

doned his post for healthier areas and could not be persuaded to return. Pastor Rinkhart officiated at the funerals of the other two pastors. As the only pastor left, he often conducted services for as many as 40 to 50 persons a day – some 4,480 in all. In May of that year, his own wife died. By the end of the year, the refugees had to be buried in trenches without services.

Yet living in a world dominated by death, Pastor Rinkhart wrote the following prayer for his children to offer to the Lord:

Now thank we all our God
With hearts and hands and voices;
Who wondrous things hath done,
In whom this world rejoices.
Who, from our mother's arms,
Hath led us on our way,
With countless gifts of love,
And still is ours today.¹⁰

Pastor Rinkhart understood that God did not owe him anything. Furthermore, he owed God everything. He was simply a dutiful servant who joyfully did his duty and gave thanks to God for his abundant mercies to him, even in the midst of a terrible epidemic and war.

Similarly, God does not owe us anything. We owe God everything. Let us remember that we are God's servants who joyfully do our duty and give thanks to him for his abundant mercies to us. Amen.

¹⁰ Barry L. Davis, *52 Topical Sermons*, vol. 3, Pulpit Outlines Series (Barry Davis, 2013), 30.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and membership in his church family,
develop them to Christlike maturity,
equip them for their ministry in the church
and life mission in the world,
in order to magnify God's name.*

Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

This sermon, and other sermons, by the Rev. Freddy Fritz can be found at:

1. www.tampabaypresbyterian.org/sermons
2. www.sermoncentral.com/contributors/freddy-fritz-sermons-11181.asp
3. [www.sermonaudio.com/source_detail.asp?sourceid=Fred dyFritz](http://www.sermonaudio.com/source_detail.asp?sourceid=Fred%20dyFritz)

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PRAYER:

Our Father, we are indeed unworthy servants. When we do what we are commanded, we are simply doing our duty.

We thank you so much that Jesus is the worthy servant. Though he was in the form of God, he did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross in order to save sinners like us.

O Father, enable us every moment of every day to do our duty with joy and give thanks to you for your abundant mercies to us.

And for this I pray in your name. Amen.

BENEDICTION:

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.

CHARGE:

Now, brothers and sisters, go and serve God wholeheartedly!