

The Unprofitable Servants

Luke 17:7-10

With Study Questions

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And which of you, having a servant plowing or tending sheep, will say to him when he has come in from the field, 'Come at once and sit down to eat'? ⁸ But will he not rather say to him, 'Prepare something for my supper, and gird yourself and serve me till I have eaten and drunk, and afterward you will eat and drink'? ⁹ Does he thank that servant because he did the things that were commanded him? I think not. ¹⁰ So likewise you, when you have done all those things which you are commanded, say, 'We are unprofitable servants. We have done what was our duty to do' " (Luke 17:7-10).

Introduction—An Issue on Two Levels

I am not a big dessert guy. But recently we had 'Pastor Appreciation Month' and someone gave me banana bread. I took a little taste and it was pretty good. I had to run some errands so I made plans to have a piece later that evening with a glass of milk or cup of coffee. Arriving home I came to discover that it had all been eaten. I felt I owned the banana bread and, therefore, became irritable. It was, after all, 'Pastor Appreciation' banana bread. I had developed a sense of entitlement over the banana bread.

I find myself dealing with situations like this on two levels (the banana bread issue being a somewhat benign and harmless infraction I use merely as an example): First, I must determine if the others involved need a talking to regarding the appropriateness of their behavior. Do I have a responsibility to sharpen my fellow man with a loving confrontation?

Better is open rebuke than hidden love. ⁶ Faithful are the wounds of a friend (Proverbs 27:5, 6).

Secondly, and more to the point of this parable, I must recognize God's sovereign hand in all the undertakings of humanity and find a deeper contentment in whatsoever comes to pass—after all, all the banana bread in the world belongs to Him.

All the inhabitants of the earth *are* reputed as nothing; He does according to His will in the army of heaven And *among* the inhabitants of the earth. No one can restrain His hand Or say to Him, “What have You done” (Daniel 4:35? ¹

I may have an obligation to say to my fellow man, “What have you done?” but I can never, with any soundness of mind, say that to God.

An Infinite Distance

In a chapter entitled Of Good Works (XVI) of the Westminster Confession, the assembly utilized a word from this parable. Paragraph five reads:

We cannot by our best works merit pardon of sin, or eternal life at the hand of God, by reason of the great disproportion that is between them and the glory to come; and the infinite distance that is between us and God, whom, by them, we can neither profit, nor satisfy for the debt of our former sins, (Rom. 3:20, Rom. 4:2, 4, 6, Eph. 2:8–9, Tit. 3:5–7, Rom. 8:18, Ps. 16:2, Job 22:2–3, Job 35:7–8) but when we have done all we can, we have done but our duty, and are unprofitable servants: (Luke 17:10) and because, as they are good, they proceed from His Spirit; (Gal. 5:22–23) and as they are wrought by us, they are defiled, and mixed with so much weakness and imperfection, that they cannot endure the severity of God’s judgment. (Isa. 64:6, Gal. 5:17, Rom. 7:15, 18, Ps. 143:2, Ps. 130:3).

A recurring theme of the Westminster Confession (of the Reformation in general, of the Apostle Paul, of Jesus and the entirety of Scripture) is man’s inability to, in any way, satisfy the debt of his own sin; this is a major distinction between Protestants and Roman Catholics. The amount of time spent in purgatory was determined by one’s own merit or the ‘treasury of merit’ which held the superabundant merits of righteous saints from which others could draw spiritual blessings. In short, if you were good enough you would spend less time in purgatory or you could benefit by the goodness of others to get you out of purgatory.

¹ *The New King James Version*. 1982 (Da 4:35). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

We see the term “infinite distance” that we might recognize that to approach God based upon our own merit (or the merits of our friends) would be an eternally fruitless endeavor.

Do not enter into judgment with Your servant, For in Your sight no one living is righteous (Psalm 143:2).

It is Christ alone who fully satisfies for man’s sin before the Father.

...we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. ¹¹ And every priest stands daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. ¹² But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, ¹³ waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet. ¹⁴ For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified (Hebrews 10:10-14).

Approaching God with a sense of entitlement proves to be disastrous on numerous levels, not the least of which is the recognition that with merit comes the inevitable demerit and a relationship with God laden with guilt. Add to that the frustration and attending grumpiness which flows from others eating *your* banana bread—bread to which you are entitled.

This little parable may, at first glance, appear denigrating to the human effort, but it is actually quite liberating in that in its disposing of merit, it also disposes of demerit.

A Master and His Slave

Jesus seizes what was no doubt quite common in His day—a slave working for his master. In doing this Jesus was not condoning slavery (or not saying ‘thank you’ for that matter) any more than He was condoning extortion in the *Parable of the Unjust Steward* (Luke 16:1-13). Since the master in this parable represents God, the slave master relationship is highly appropriate. We are owned by God.

For if we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s. ⁹ For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he

might be Lord both of the dead and of the living (Romans 14:8, 9).

Jesus speaks of a servant/ slave *doulos* who has been working hard (plowing, keeping sheep) in the field. Our natural inclination, since this is Jesus teaching, would be to assume the parable would encourage the hard working slave to have a seat at the table and relax for a while. But Jesus presses the issue.

He is not holding back from acknowledging that the work of the slave in the field has been laborious and it is followed by more work when he gets to the house.

And which of you, having a servant plowing or tending sheep, will say to him when he has come in from the field, 'Come at once and sit down to eat'?⁸ But will he not rather say to him, 'Prepare something for my supper, and gird yourself and serve me till I have eaten and drunk, and afterward you will eat and drink (Luke 17:7, 8)?

Not Even a 'Thank You!'

There is no indication that the slave has been lazy or disrespectful. It is woven into our very nature to expect at least an 'atta boy' at this juncture; but in the parable none is given.

Does he thank that servant because he did the things that were commanded him? I think not (Luke 17:9).

He doesn't even thank him! Is this not behavior we teach our children to avoid? Do we not teach our children to thank, even hired servants at a restaurant or over a counter? Jesus dispenses even with the pleasantries in order to solidify His point. His point found in the final verse.

So likewise you, when you have done all those things which you are commanded, say, 'We are unprofitable servants. We have done what was our duty to do' " (Luke 17:10).

God is Not a Man

God will often present Himself in very human ways/terms in order to accommodate our inability to comprehend a being that is infinite in being, blessedness and perfection.²

Can you find out the deep things of God? Can you find out the limit of the Almighty? ⁸ It is higher than heaven—what can you do? Deeper than Sheol—what can you know? ⁹ Its measure is longer than the earth and broader than the sea (Job 11:7-9).

We err when we think that God's presentation of Himself in human terms makes Him human.

And also the Glory of Israel will not lie or have regret, for he is not a man, that he should have regret (1 Samuel 15:29).

The master in the parable would be an arrogant man for no man can fully own another man. It is shocking parables like this that should transform our thinking when it comes to our thoughts of God—which will eventually transform our thoughts about everything.

Unprofitable Servants

If we were to do **“all that”** we were commanded we **“say”** (*legete*—imperative) **“we are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty.”**

First, who has actually done all their duty? Jesus points that even if we had; we have brought not profit to God.

Can a man be profitable to God? Surely he who is wise is profitable to himself. ³ Is it any pleasure to the Almighty if you are in the right, or is it gain to him if you make your ways blameless (Job 22:2, 3)?

² *The Westminster larger catechism : With scripture proofs.* 1996. Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor? ³⁵ Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid (Romans 11:34)?

Blessings may in fact follow obedience (as is so often promised in Scripture—James 1:25) but never as a result of indebtedness on God's part. God owes man nothing! This is true if we speak of eternal blessings or judgments or the ease or difficulty we might encounter in our daily life.

We must never, like Peter, preface our request for God's blessings with the words:

See, we have left all and followed You. Therefore what shall we have (Matthew 19:27)?

It is the source of untold frustrations when we pursue our worldly relationships with the "look what I've done you..." preamble to the dialogue, how much more fruitless when we seek to approach God this way! Our love for one another and service to one another should not be approached with a sense of fulfilling or creating a debt but as a result of the way we are loved by God and served by Christ.

Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant. ²⁷ And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave— ²⁸ just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many (Matthew 20:26-28).

Unprofitable, Yet Rich

The faithful servant may be unprofitable, but that doesn't mean he's not rich. Earlier in this gospel Jesus gives a different lesson in a similar setting.

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 (Luke 12:37).

It is the slave who has dispensed with thoughts of merit but with faith looks to the blessings of Christ from Christ, flowing from His own good pleasure who finds himself reclining at the table, being served by Christ.

I don't want to overly impose ideas back into the current parable, but perhaps we can imagine the joy of the slave who is neither praised nor thanked for his good work in the field only to find that he has received the inheritance of the entire estate; that he is no longer a slave at all but a friend (John 15:15), an heir of **"every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places"** (Ephesians 1:3).

This parable yields rich blessings in our hearts as it moves us to recognize that God did not hire us according to our qualifications but **"predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, ⁶ to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved"** (Ephesians 1:6).

The message contained in this parable shuffles our thinking away from approaching redemption or forgiveness according to our work in the field or house but **"according to the riches of his grace, ⁸ which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight"** (Ephesians 1:7, 8).

It is a counter-intuitive parable like this that reveals how much our thinking needs to be transformed in everything.

Questions for Study

1. What are the two levels with which we must deal with situations (pages 2, 3)?
2. Why do you suppose the Westminster Confessions speaks of an "infinite distance" (pages 3, 4)?
3. What inevitably comes when we approach God with the disposition of 'merit' (page 4)?
4. Is Jesus condoning slavery in this parable? Explain (pages 4, 5).
5. Why does God present Himself with human qualities? What should we avoid when it comes to this accommodation by God (page 6)?
6. Can men be profitable to God? Explain (page 7).

7. Does God promise blessings from obedience? Does that mean we've earned blessings? Explain your answer (page 7).
8. How can men be unprofitable, yet rich (page 8)?