

Luke 17. 7-10. The parable of the unprofitable servant. Georgia. 10 November 2008.¹

Last evening we looked at one of the *better* known of our Lord's parables – the so-called parable of the Good Samaritan. This evening I want to speak to you about one of the *lesser* known – and shortest – of our Lord's parables that of the Unprofitable Servant – which is found in Luke 17. 7-10.

But because the parable opens with the word 'But' – alerting us to the fact that it is connected in some way with what passed between Jesus and the apostles in the previous verses – I shall begin reading at verse 1 of Luke 17.²

Then said he unto the disciples, It is impossible but that offences will come: but woe unto him, through whom they come! It were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and he cast into the sea, than that he should offend one of these little ones.

Take heed to yourselves: If thy brother trespass against thee, rebuke him; and if he repent, forgive him. And if he trespass against thee seven times in a day, and seven times in a day turn again to thee, saying, I repent; thou shalt forgive him.

And the apostles said unto the Lord, Increase our faith.

And the Lord said, If ye had faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye might say unto this sycamine tree, Be thou plucked up by the root, and be thou planted in the sea; and it should obey you.

But which of you, having a servant ploughing or feeding cattle, will say unto him by and by, when he is come from the field, Go and sit down to meat? And will not rather say unto him, Make ready wherewith I may sup, and gird thyself, and serve me, till I have eaten and drunken; and afterward thou shalt eat and drink?

Doth he thank that servant because he did the things that were commanded him?

I think not. So likewise ye, when ye shall have done all those things which are commanded you, say, We are unprofitable servants: we have done that which was our duty to do.

The short story Jesus told concerned the owner of a small farm. He had only one servant – literally, slave – who not only filled the role of ploughman and shepherd but who performed all the domestic duties in the house. The life of the slave was very full – and rather hard.

Justin Martyr, writing in the middle of the second century, said of the Lord Jesus, 'He was deemed a carpenter, for He was in the habit of working as a carpenter when among men, making ploughs and yokes'.³ And so it is more than likely that, when working as a carpenter, our Lord had come into contact with many such men as this household slave.

Though the slave was not denied the opportunity or the wherewithal to see to his own needs eventually, this could only follow the performance of all his duties. And so, returning from his day's heavy workload, he is required to prepare, unthanked, for his master's comfort before he is permitted to meet his own needs – which he does without question or complaint.⁴

But what are we to make of this story? Does the Lord Jesus mean to portray *God* as some hard, inconsiderate and ungrateful taskmaster, indifferent both to the past labour and present weariness of His servants, accepting their toil without any acknowledgement or gratitude? To ask the question is, of course, to answer it. No, our Lord certainly didn't want *His apostles* (v. 5), and He doesn't want *us*, to get the blasphemous impression that God is some heartless and unfeeling slave-driver. Nor does He want any of us to walk away with the idea that God will fail to reward – and that generously – all faithful service rendered to Him.⁵ We have only to listen to our Lord's clear and unambiguous teaching elsewhere.

For example, His words recorded in Mark 9 – 'whoever gives you a cup of water to drink in my name, because you belong to Christ, verily I say to you, he will by no means lose his reward', v. 41, and in chapter 6 of this very gospel, 'Love your enemies, do good, and lend, hoping for nothing in return; and your reward will be great', v. 35 ... teaching which He later expanded through His apostles; for example, through Paul in 1 Corinthians 3, 'Each one will receive his own reward according to his own labour ... the fire will test each one's work, of what sort it is. If anyone's work ... endures, he will receive a reward', vv. 8, 14.⁶

Are we to reconcile such passages then by saying that, although we really have *no just or legitimate claim* on any recompense from God, God *in His grace* will yet bestow rewards on us? No, that *won't* work, because the New

Testament is very clear that God's people are to receive rewards for their faithful and sacrificial service, not as a matter of *grace* but as a matter of *justice*.

Towards the close of his life the apostle Paul wrote, 'I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that day', 2 Tim. 4. 7-8, and the writer to the Hebrews assures us that 'God is not unrighteous to forget your work and the love which you have showed toward His name, in that you have ministered to the saints, and do minister', Heb. 6. 10. We serve a wonderful God, who, on the one hand, says of those who are His people, 'their sins and iniquities will I remember no more', Heb. 10. 17, and, on the other hand, that He will never forget their labours for Him. Make no mistake, God keeps accurate records of every Christian's service – and He doesn't forget – even if we do!

Interestingly, the Saviour had earlier promised that He Himself will one day do for His servants exactly what He says in our passage that no normal master would ever dream of doing! 'Blessed are those servants', He said in chapter 12, 'whom the lord when he comes shall find watching. Verily I say to you, that *he shall gird himself and make them sit down at table, and will come and serve them*', v. 37. That is, the very thing which, according to our passage, no servant had any right to expect from his master, the Saviour has already told His disciples He will do for them! In other words, the *extraordinary* action of the Lord described in chapter 12 portrays *His attitude* to His servants, whereas the expectation of the master here in chapter 17 portrays *the normal attitude of a master* to his servant.⁷

And we note that, in our Lord's story here in Luke 17, the servant receives *no thanks* – not one word of approval or praise – for his strenuous service, whereas we are assured by the apostle Paul that, when '*the Lord comes ...* then shall each (of His servants, that is) have his (own) praise from God', 1 Cor. 4. 5.

So, we may well wonder, what *does* our Lord's parable mean? But to some extent we need to delve into the preceding context before attempting to answer that question.

'It is impossible but that offences – that causes of stumbling⁸ – come', Jesus said. It is a fact of life. At the beginning of chapter 15 we were told that the Pharisees and scribes had treated the tax-collectors and sinners who crowded around Jesus with disdain, and in the latter section of chapter 16 the Lord spoke of a rich show-off who had treated destitute Lazarus similarly. By means of such an attitude, great spiritual harm can be done to those who were poor, weak, vulnerable and despised to 'these little ones', as the Lord described them.

Jesus warned His disciples not to commit a similar sin – that is, not to cause the outcasts who had turned to Him for refuge to stumble. For though, in the present world, it is inevitable that at times such *are* going to be tripped up, woe to the person who sets the stumbling block in their way.⁹

The Saviour made His point very graphically – that the fate of the man who causes spiritual harm and ruin to one of His defenceless 'little ones' by exposing them to some temptation ... that his fate will be so grim that he would be better off if he was hurled into the sea with his head poking through the centre hole of a large millstone.

The millstone of which Jesus spoke is the top of two stones between which grain is crushed. And the word which Jesus used refers not to a hand-mill, but to the much heavier stone pulled around by a donkey or ox. That is, to have a *huge stone hung around his neck* to ensure his drowning out in the open sea is, the Lord says, too good a punishment for the man who *places a stone of stumbling* in the path of one of His – the Lord's – 'little ones'. This is serious stuff!¹⁰ Believe me, a stone necklace of that size and weight would do nothing for your breaststroke! And it would rule out any possibility of the body rising again to the surface and being given a decent burial by friends or family – a consideration which – to our Lord's disciples – would only have increased the horror of such a death. I understand that such a method of execution was actually employed by Augustus Caesar – clearly not a man to cross!

Jesus then proceeded *from* warning His disciples against leading other people into sin, *to* warning them against neglecting to help those who sin *against them*. The disciple's responsibility in such cases, He said, is twofold : first, the admonition and rebuke of the offender, and, second, the generous forgiveness of the repentant person. For in the Christian life there is not only the danger of offending others. There is also the danger of harbouring grudges and of refusing to forgive when the offending person apologizes.

The Lord makes it clear that, when someone sins against us, we are not to bottle up our feelings inside – still less to gossip about the person or slander him behind his back – but that we should rebuke him, and, if he responds to the rebuke, are under obligation to forgive him. And that not just once or twice. But, if necessary, seven times in a day.

This requirement went way beyond the teaching of the Jewish Rabbis for example, Rabbi Jose ben Hanina taught that, 'He who begs forgiveness from his neighbour must not do so more than three times'.¹¹ Rabbi Jose ben Jahuda agreed, going on record as having said, 'If a man commit an offence, once they forgive him, a second time they

forgive him, a third time they forgive him, the fourth time they do not forgive him, for it is said', he explained, 'For three transgressions and for four I will not turn away the punishment thereof'.

Rabbi Jose ben Jahuda took his proof text from the book of Amos – well, actually, his proof texts – because the herdsman-prophet had used that expression no less than eight times in the first two chapters of his book. From which Rabbi Jose ben Jahuda concluded that if the Lord was not prepared to spare men his anger if they committed an offence four times, then neither need he – or anyone else for that matter. Hence his ruling 'if a man commit an offence, once they forgive him, a second time they forgive him, a third time they forgive him, the fourth time they do not forgive him'. But our Rabbi friend, clearly not the most intelligent expositor around, had entirely misunderstood the point – that 'for three transgressions and for four' was *never* meant to be taken *literally* – that the expression simply indicated that the measure of their sins was full, and more than full.

And neither, of course, is our Lord's 'seven times in a day' to be understood as a literal limit. The Lord Jesus is teaching absolute and unlimited forgiveness.

Nor am I, as the offended party, in a position to judge the genuineness of the offender's repentance. If someone sins against me seven times in a day, and asks me to forgive him each time, I may well question whether he is really sincere. But Jesus commands me to accept the word of the offender and to continue to forgive him.¹²

Reeling under the impact of this double requirement namely, on the one hand, to avoid causing others to stumble, and, on the other, to be always ready to forgive, the apostles appealed to Jesus, 'Increase – add to – our faith'. 'Lord, we need help with this! We are going to need a special 'faith supplement' to make us spiritually stronger!'

'No, you don't', Jesus replied, 'The active exercise and use of the faith you already have is more than adequate to meet any need you face'. 'If you have faith as a mustard seed, you would say to this sycamine (this mulberry) tree (probably gesturing to some nearby mulberry tree as He spoke), 'Be uprooted and be planted in the sea', and it would obey you'.

As I am sure you know the mustard seed is proverbially small - about the size of a pin head - about 1/20th of an inch. It was, as Jesus said elsewhere, 'the least of all seeds', Matt. 13. 32 – in all likelihood meaning that it was the smallest cultivated seed in the land of Israel.¹³

By way of contrast, the sycamine – that is, the mulberry – tree was large – growing to a height of 30 foot – with dense, spreading branches often reaching wider than its height. And the *roots* of the sycamine were reckoned to be particularly strong, on account of which it was thought by many Jews of Jesus' day that the tree could stand for 600 years.¹⁴

And we should note that Jesus spoke in terms not of the mulberry tree merely being *thrown* into the sea – as the person who caused someone else to stumble – but of actually being *planted* in the sea – that is, of the additional miracle of the large tree standing firm and erect above the sea with its entire root system held in place by nothing more than the flowing waters.

Not, of course, that either our Lord or His apostles understood what He said literally. He was, as often, using a hyperbole – a deliberate overstatement to make a point. But there is a whole world of difference between not taking a statement literally and not taking it seriously. And the smallest amount of real faith, He was saying, can accomplish tremendous things, always assuming, of course, that this small amount of faith rests in a great and mighty God.

Possibly, in the context here, the Lord was saying that such a small measure of real faith was sufficient to give them all the power they needed to do the humanly impossible – namely, to win the victory over themselves, and to tear up their deep-rooted natural selfishness and unforgiving spirit – against which His earlier commands had been aimed.

And then comes the parable – introduced I note again, by the word 'But'. That is, if I understand it correctly, the Lord is saying that it was not so much *additional faith* they needed – that faith wasn't the *only* issue. If they had faith the size of a mustard seed, they could do anything. The main issues to which our Lord drew attention were those of obedience and humility.

So what *does* our section mean?

I suggest that the key lies in the nature of a parable. It is important to note that in several of the other parables in the surrounding context the Lord drew just one main lesson from His story – and that the other details of the parable were not *meant* to be applied – and indeed often stood in deliberate contrast to the application He made of the story. For example, the point of the parable back at the beginning of chapter 11 – about the friend at midnight – which began, as here, 'which of you' – was that when, in prayer, we ask we are given, when we seek we find, when

we knock the door is opened – and not that God is in any way a selfish and reluctant giver like the man in bed at midnight who needed to be pestered and cajoled into giving the much needed loaves.

Again, the point of the parable at the beginning of chapter 16 – about the dishonest steward – was that we should imitate the steward's *shrewdness and wisdom* in making diligent use of resources which really belonged to his lord – and which were at his disposal for a short time only – to achieve his own end and purpose – to secure some long-term benefit for himself when the inevitable day of reckoning came – and *not* that we should imitate *his dishonesty, and the fraud he practised*.

And again, the point of the parable about the godless and unjust judge at the beginning of chapter 18 is that, just as *he* eventually vindicated and avenged the widow who had been wronged, so God will assuredly vindicate and avenge His chosen ones – and *not* that God needs, as that judge, to be worn down and exhausted by somebody before doing so.

In *this case*, the Lord Jesus makes the point and purpose of His parable very clear. It is that, if and when we have done all that is commanded us, we must yet regard ourselves as 'unprofitable servants', having done only what we ought to have done.¹⁵

Our parable tells us *nothing* about *the view which God takes* of our service – *nor*, for that matter, about *the motive* out of which we should perform our service – which ought to be with gladness of heart, in the spirit of love and gratitude, and not, as in the case of the servant, because we have no choice in the matter. The application of the parable centres exclusively on the view which *we* – as God's servants – must take of ourselves and our service – on the humble spirit in which we should serve God – banishing all thought of self-satisfaction or self-congratulation from our minds.

That is, the parable isn't meant to illustrate the proper attitude of *the 'master'*, but to exhort us to adopt the proper attitude of *the servant*. The Lord Jesus isn't suggesting for one moment that God is ungrateful for His people's obedience. He is forbidding us to pat ourselves on the back because of what we have done and achieved.

And it is important therefore to note the change in focus from the attitude of *the master in our Lord's parable* to the attitude of *the servant in our Lord's application* of His parable – from the 'Which of *you*, *having a servant* ploughing or feeding cattle ('tending sheep')' of verse 7 to the 'So likewise *you*, when you shall have done all those things which are commanded you, *say, We are unprofitable servants*' of verse 10.¹⁶¹⁷

And so the spotlight falls *not* on *the master's* attitude – taking his servant's constant and faithful service for granted – without one word of thanks – but on *the servant's* attitude when he has performed his work.

For we are simply stewards, for a time, of the abilities and opportunities which the Lord gives to us – whose duty – and privilege – it is to work ceaselessly for our Master.

I say 'privilege' – for so it is. There is no higher service. And I note that, when, in the days of Ezra, Tattenai the governor beyond the River and the other civil authorities asked the elders of the Jews who had given them the authority to build the Temple and the walls at Jerusalem, they specifically asked them for their names – to which they simply responded, 'We are the servants of the God of heaven and earth'. To these good men, that was all that mattered. Yes, indeed, there is no higher service.

I note also, that, when James and Jude, who were 'the Lord's brothers' according to the flesh, wrote their epistles, they both introduced themselves in the same way, as 'the bondservants' (the 'slaves') of the Lord Jesus Christ. Clearly, to them also, there was nothing higher. And it is our privilege too to work for such a Master.

It isn't that *we* do *God* some great favour by serving Him, but that He most certainly does us a great favour in permitting – and in enabling – us to do that.

And how grateful we should each be for the immense privilege of being permitted to serve Him.

But what are we to understand by the servants' description of themselves as 'unprofitable'? There can be no question that the word which Jesus used here *normally* carries the meaning 'useless' and 'good for nothing'.¹⁸

And that is certainly its meaning in the only other place where it occurs in the New Testament. In the parable of the talents in Matthew 25, speaking to the 'wicked and slothful servant' who hid his talent in the ground and put it to no use, his master says, 'cast the *unprofitable* servant into the outer darkness', Matt. 25. 30. That is, he was 'unprofitable' in that he had brought no gain to his master. And this may well be the sense in which Jesus used the word here. For, even if we do *everything* required of us, we do no more than we ought – we give to God only what He is owed. And, in that sense, He gains nothing from us. There may also be the idea that He gains nothing from us, because, in the end, He doesn't *need* our service – He isn't dependent upon *us*. And, indeed, I note that some

scholars have suggested that the word is to be understood here, not so much as 'unprofitable', but as 'not needed, as expendable'.¹⁹

And certainly God *doesn't* need us. Painful as the discovery is, His work will go on without us. It is our *privilege* to serve Him.

I don't think the Lord was denying that, when we do what God demands of us, we do something which, in itself, *is* profitable. But the point is, surely, that it isn't necessary that *we* do it. God could equally well use someone else.

Perhaps you remember the words of Mordecai the Jew to Queen Esther when he, she and all the Jews through the 127 provinces of the Persian empire were effectively under sentence of death; 'if you hold your peace ('keep silence') at this time ('at such a time as this'), then shall relief and deliverance arise to the Jews from another place, but you and your father's house shall be destroyed. And who knows whether you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this?', Esther 4. 14. Note Mordecai's confidence, 'if *you* keep silence at such a time as this, then *shall* relief and deliverance arise *to* the Jews *from another place*'.

Unquestionably, *God* doesn't need *us*²⁰ – He isn't biting His fingernails in case we fail to turn up for work – but, equally unquestionably, *we* need *Him!* And we can only respond in amazement and gratitude that He deigns to use us at all.

And the Lord is still looking for the man or woman who will say, 'Though I may be – and am – an unprofitable servant – I am determined to do that which is my duty'.

Admiral Lord Nelson was born 250 years ago this month.²¹ It was a little over 200 years ago²², as the decisive Battle of Trafalgar was about to commence with the nearest enemy ships less than two miles away, that he hung out his motto to the breeze, 'England expects every man to do his duty'. The following naval engagement was perhaps the most significant naval battle in history, giving the United Kingdom control of the seas, and eliminating any possibility of a French invasion.

'England expects every man to do his duty' – and *God* expects no less! But He expects also that, if, with His help, we do just that, we then acknowledge that that is *all* we have done – our duty – and that we are no more than 'unprofitable slaves'!

I was struck many years ago by the words of South American Pentecostal pastor Juan Carlos Ortiz in his book 'Disciple', 'Can you say you have done everything the Lord told you to do? If so, we can have a graduation ceremony for you. We will give you a diploma which reads, '...unworthy slave!' (Page 39.) And, whether I like it or not, that's my honorary title.

I will leave the last word this evening with John Wesley.

With his eyes on the servant in *our* parable who *did* what was commanded him, and the servant in the parable of *the talents* who *did not* do what was commanded him, Mr Wesley wrote, '*Happy* is he who judges *himself* an unprofitable servant: *miserable* is he whom *God* pronounces such'.²³

Endnotes

- ¹ Fuller and tidier notes can be accessed at http://www.preciousseed.org/article_detail.cfm?articleID=2960.
- ² Luke has given us 'an orderly account', Luke 1. 3. His inspired report is not therefore a hodgepodge of unconnected sections.
- ³ 'Dialogue of Justin with Trypho, a Jew', chapter 88 - written about 150 AD.
- ⁴ Often, in his parables, Jesus poses a series of questions to his hearers to provoke them to thought – and this was no exception.
- ⁵ God always values and recompenses the right thing, done in the right way, at the right time, for the right motive.
- ⁶ Compare Rom. 14. 10-11; 2 Cor. 5. 9-10; Heb. 11. 26 ('he looked to the payment of the wages').
- ⁷ '...we must gird ourselves to serve the Lord, and so prepare ourselves for the time when He will gird Himself at His supper'. Work now, and rest afterwards when all is done.
- ⁸ *σκάνδαλα*, "things which cause one to stumble," is probably used in line with the Septuagint, from which it gains overtones of that which causes stumbling in addition to the imagery of a snare or trap from the Greek origins of the term. The word describes something placed in the way to cause someone to stumble or fall.
- ⁹ People are going to take the bait - but woe to you if you offer the hook.
- ¹⁰ The argument might be put this way: 'Look, traffic accidents are bound to happen. Why, then, can't I drive down the street at a hundred miles an hour?' The policeman's likely response is, 'Tell it to the judge' – and it is exactly parallel to our Lord's comment here.
- ¹¹ The Rabbis were generous in granting the lawfulness of repeating rebuke upon rebuke, but they are most sparing about forgiveness where any had given an offence. They allow, from Lev. 19. 17, that a man may rebuke a hundred times if there be any need for it. But as to forgiving him that offends, they abuse the words of the prophet Amos, 'for three transgressions' (found eight times in chapters 1 and 2); and that of Job 33. 29, 'Lo, God worketh all these things three times with man'; and taught that a man is not bound to forgive a fourth trespass. Their standard was clear – you are required to forgive three times. For example, Rabbi Jose ben Jahuda said, 'If a man commit an offence, once they forgive him, a second time they forgive him, a third time they forgive him, the fourth time they do not forgive him, for it is said, For three transgressions and for four I will not turn away the punishment thereof' - which expression really signifies an indefinite number – i.e. numerous. Rabbi Jose ben Hanina said, 'He who begs forgiveness from his neighbour must not do so more than three times'.
- ¹² What do we do with the person who has never repented? Do we forgive them? See Gen. 50. 15-17 – where 'forgive' equals holding no grudge and not paying back for wrongs. Certainly we cannot harbour the pain and bitterness of the offence in our hearts. At least, love them and pray for them.
- ¹³ We often hear of it in the Rabb. Writings; e.g. 'as big (or as little) as a grain of mustard seed'. This is the common black mustard (*Sinapis nigra* L.). In New Testament times its seeds were cultivated for their oil as well as for culinary purposes. The seed is about the size of a pin head, was one of the smallest known to the people of Galilee, and likely the smallest cultivated seed. Edersheim (*Life and Times*, 1, p. 593) says that the diminutive size of the seed was commonly used in comparison by the rabbis ... 'to indicate the smallest amount such as the least drop of blood, the least defilement, etc'. Speaking universally, the orchids of the tropical rain forest produce the world's smallest seeds weighing only 35 millionths of an ounce – much smaller than mustard seeds.
- ¹⁴ Cf. Str.-B., II, 234: 'The rootage of the sycamine was reckoned to be particularly strong; it was thought that the tree could stand 600 years in the earth. In Gn. r., 13 on 2. 5 we read that the roots of the sycamine and the carob-bean tree go down into the primal depths'. See Geldenhuys in *The New London Commentary*.
- ¹⁵ Yes, it is true that, as the servant in the story, it is our duty to give our all, and, as that servant, we ought to labour and toil patiently – not slacking in our service. Paul drew attention to this twice in his earliest letters: 'let us *not be weary* in well-doing: for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not', Gal. 6. 9, and 'But you, brethren, do *not be weary* in well-doing', 2 Thess. 3. 13.
- ¹⁶ This is exactly what we have in Luke 11. 11–13.
- ¹⁷ The Lord rapidly moved from asking each of His disciples to imagine that he was the master of a servant to speaking of the servant's master as 'he' – 'will *he* not say to him, Prepare ... Does *he* thank that servant ...?'
- ¹⁸ Rather than 'unworthy' as in the NIV.
- ¹⁹ 'Not needed', Bullinger, *A Critical Lexicon and Concordance to the English and Greek New Testament*, page 833; 'expendable', *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, by William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, page 369.
- ²⁰ Only the colt of the ass was needed.
- ²¹ 29 September 1758.
- ²² On 21 October 1805.
- ²³ And yet, though we are, in one sense, unprofitable to the Lord, our service for Him is not unprofitable to us. For He is pleased to give enduring and eternal rewards for all faithful service rendered to Him. And to the one who has done the will of God from the heart and who yet confesses himself to be an 'unprofitable servant', the Lord Himself will declare, 'Well done, good and faithful servant'.