

Parables of Jesus

Message 10

The Happy Slaves

Luke 17:5-10

Introduction

I am glad to see you all tonight, after a week of important exams. I know you are tired from long hours of study and the seemingly relentless pressure of your classes. If you have time to read the news, you know that the economy is slowly picking up – so there is hope that your studies will pay off and you will get a job when you graduate. But we all know that the best jobs go to the best students, and that increases the anxiety factor. So it is fitting that tonight we discuss how God views our performance. In tonight's parable Jesus tells us clearly how God looks at our lives.

The passage opens, however, not speaking of God's assessment of us, but with a request concerning faith. "Increase our faith," the disciples ask of Jesus, and Jesus gives a one-verse answer. But I wonder what even prompted the question. It sails in from nowhere and gets dropped as quickly. The passage gives us no direct clues as to why the disciples asked this question, but I think the previous four verses suggest an answer.

For several chapters Jesus has been responding to the Pharisees. He rebuked their hateful attitude toward the sinners and tax collectors, and told the frightening parable of the rich man and Lazarus to warn them about the danger of their love of money. Turning to His disciples He said, in essence, "people are going to sin, but too bad for him who does so." Then He proceeded to hit the disciples right in the gut with a sin they all struggled with. How can I be so sure they all struggled with this sin? Because everyone does, including all of us here. It is the sin of refusing to forgive. You see, we get so focused on the sin of others – and they do sin – that we sin ourselves by harboring evil thoughts about them. In this election season we are tempted to become angry at the behavior of the other candidates and harbor ill-will in our hearts. You may feel angry at your professor or your classmates if they do things which make it difficult for you to get the grade you want. You might even resent some of your brothers and sisters in RUF. Certainly everyone here has been sinned against by a roommate or neighbor or friend – and you find it hard to forgive. In fact, you would rather not be reminded about these sad episodes and wish we would get back to the passage at hand – which, I think, is what the disciples did. They essentially changed the subject by asking a question about faith.

Jesus replied by saying essentially, "Faith is not a problem. You have all the faith you need – in fact you already have a surplus of faith. You have so much faith you could rip up a mulberry tree." Some other time we will talk about faith – what it is and how it works – but tonight we will follow Jesus as He puts the topic aside and told a brief parable.

Christian Duty

The parable is so brief there is hardly any story line. It's really more like an extended metaphor – a picture of a household. You know how a household works. Your servants work in the field all day and come in at night, but then they have evening responsibilities as well. They don't get to eat right away, but have to serve the master his meal first. There is nothing extraordinary about any of this – it is the proper role of the servants in any normal household.

It's like you working at a job – maybe Peter on the construction crew or Chris in the lab this summer. Chris puts in his 8-hours each day and does good work. But does the professor then say, "Chris you

worked hard all week. Take Friday off.” No, of course not. Neither did Peter’s boss say, “Peter you really put in long hours today. Go home and I will clean up the equipment.” Nor did Chris or Peter get any special thanks for their labors. There was no party at the end of the week or bonus at the end of the summer. They got their pay, which they earned by working, but no one expected special treatment. And why not? Because they didn’t do anything special. They did good work, but that was expected and they were paid for it. Now perhaps if Chris had written some software which won a national prize, they might have rewarded him.

So it is in the Christian life. You faithfully follow Christ, you read your Bible and pray, attend RUF meetings, love your family, avoid the big sins, and do your best to serve God. Good. But you weren’t expecting any special rewards, were you? You met the minimum requirements – so why should you be praised? In fact, Jesus even says you are an unprofitable servant. In other words, it takes more for Jesus to keep you here than He gets out of you. He could do the job cheaper Himself. Think about this. It would be easier on Jesus – He could save people more easily and increase righteousness on the earth more quickly if we did not keep getting in the way. It is like baking with a toddler, or weeding the garden with a small child. They love to help. I remember especially how much fun it was to sift the flour when my mother was baking something, and we kids loved to play in the dirt when my father was trying to plant the vegetables. But now as an adult, I can see that the help of children is actually a hindrance. To put it bluntly, they do not help at all. They get in the way, slow down the job, and make everything more difficult. Jesus is saying we are like this in the work of His Kingdom. We do lots of things, but it would be easier on Him to do it Himself. So when you follow Jesus’ commands you definitely do not get any rewards, for you have just done your duty – barely.

Duty, Love, and Joy

Oops – we just said the D word. No one uses it any more, have you noticed? Poor thing, this word is feeling badly neglected. But here we have it, and out of the mouth of Jesus, no less. Although you seldom find politicians, teachers, or pastors mentioning it today, Jesus says the Christian life involves duty.

Why does Jesus disappoint us by bringing up duty? What about love and joy? Isn’t the Christian life supposed to be motivated by love and filled with joy? Isn’t duty the opposite of love, and doesn’t duty kill joy? To hear most people talk you would think so. Even most churches teach or give the impression that you must not serve God out of duty, that asking people to do their duty is a wrong thing to do. You get the impression that if you aren’t experiencing joy you should stop what you are doing – even if it’s the right, loving, Biblical thing to do. It seems like duty is made the enemy of love and joy.

But this is not the Biblical meaning. Scripture teaches both the necessity of duty and the reality of love and joy. Just look at the life of Jesus himself. Jesus plainly discharged his duty. Jesus was sent to earth by His Father to minister for three years and then to die for us. He did this, and He did it without hesitation or complaint. But He also loved His Father. In Jesus love and duty are joined. Look also at the apostle Paul. Here was a man whose mission in life was to preach Christ to the gentiles of the Roman empire. Although his life was unbearably hard, Paul never flinched from his duty. He was beaten, shipwrecked, imprisoned, and driven out of town, but he kept on. Paul said, “Yet when I preach the gospel, I cannot boast, for I am compelled to preach.” (1 Corinthians 9:16) Preaching was Paul’s duty. But although Paul was discouraged and worried at times, joy was a constant part of his life. His letters abound with references to his joy in Christ, such as Romans 5:2-3a, “And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings...” To Paul, joy and duty are joined.

Throughout the New Testament we are given many commands to obey, including the command to love God and to rejoice always. The Biblical picture of the Christian life is one of duty, love, and joy joined

together. So if this is the Biblical vision, why do we resent duty so? Why does the mere suggestion that you *must* do something, whether we want to or not, immediately raise our ire? We resent and resist duty because of sin. This is the essence of sin – rebellion against God – and it goes right back to the Garden of Eden. Adam’s duty was to avoid the tree of the knowledge of good and evil – but he rebelled and ate anyway. All through history man has rebelled against his duty to God and to his fellow man. Sin consists not only of the wrong things we do, but also of the rebellious heart which prompts sinful behavior.

What is the Christian to do, then? Well certainly, we aren’t to avoid our duty to obey God’s laws. No, when we find ourselves becoming angry or discouraged by our duty to God, we should do what is always the remedy for sin – repent. Resentment toward duty is the exposure of sin in your heart. Only by repenting of your sin can you find the love and joy that goes along with doing your duty. Many people, when they resent doing their duty to God, turn their anger toward their teacher, or parents, or the Bible, or campus minister, or even God himself. They never go back to that Church or Bible study, but look for one which is more upbeat, more exciting, more encouraging. They warmly embrace cheap Christianity and settle for a shallow relationship with God. In the process, they lose most of the love and joy God promises to those who follow Christ and replace it with imitation happiness.

But where is the grace, you say. In spite of everything, and the New Testament promises of love and joy notwithstanding, this parable is a plain, unvarnished moral that it’s up to you to do your duty, – and don’t expect any thanks for it. But that would be too far from the truth... For God’s grace is evident in that we are His servants! There was no job interview, there is no minimum GPA, there is no probationary period. There is no minimum level of production. We are God’s servants apart from anything we do! You see, the parable states this quite clearly. Jesus admits that we are unprofitable, but there is no hint that we may be fired for substandard performance. Yes, we ruin things by our sin. And if we manage to avoid sin, we foul up God’s work by our ignorance and mistakes. And even when we are doing everything right, we still require more from God than we return. If we were employed by any businessman on earth, we would be fired. Jesus keeps using us in His Kingdom. If the Christian life were a course at Lehigh, what would be God’s passing grade? It’s a pointless question, because there is no exam! No grade is given! This parable shows us that our evaluation is all by God’s grace, apart from any work that we might do.

God’s Grace

Do you see the point here? God has hired us as his servants even though we are essentially unprofitable. Why would He do that? Why would He pay an infinite price for us – the death of his Son? We might be able to rationalize it if we could show that God actually benefitted from saving us – but the opposite is the case. We cost God more than we are worth! Why? Why would God put Christ to a horrible death for miserable, half-hearted us? There’s only one answer. He loves us. This also is why God uses us in His Kingdom. A good parent will welcome her toddler into the kitchen or his small child into the garden, not for the labor they provide, but for the pleasure of being with the one he loves. So it is with God. He welcomes us into His service because He delights to be with us. We cannot understand this. We cannot explain it. We can only rejoice in it, and preach it, beg of you not to scorn God’s love.

So now do you see how love and duty are joined? If you have any inkling of the love of your great Savior, your duty will become a pleasure. He who resents duty ultimately rejects the love of Christ. But he who imbibes deeply of the love of Christ is energized to follow Him. Christ gave up everything for us – the bliss of heaven, the love of His father, the comforts of life, and even life itself. You have escaped certain torment in hell forever by his love for you. If you will not love Christ enough to follow Him – to do the duty He requires, you are a wretched Christian.

It's for the love of Christ that you pull yourself out of bed on Sunday morning to worship Him in church. It's because Christ loves you that you read His word and pray to him every day. Christ's love moves you to do your duty in giving your tithe to the church. Christ's love keeps you from sexual impurity. Because Christ loves you, unprofitable though you are, you accept – you even welcome other unprofitable servants – even those who are different from you, or annoying. And because Christ loves you and forgives you your sin, you forgive others – even when they sin against you seven times in one day.

Isn't this parable overwhelming? Aren't you are filled with deep gratitude to God for you salvation – totally unearned? Aren't you are awed and humbled before a great God who would love you this much? In Francis Thompson's poem "The Hound of Heaven", God pursues the foolish sinner like a hound pursues his quarry. Cornered at last, God says to you, "Of all Man's clotted clay, the dingiest clot. Alack! Thou knowest not How little worthy of any love thou art. Whom wilt thou find to love ignoble thee, Save me, save only me?" The sober reality is that in God's economy we cost more to keep than we produce. The wonderful good news is that our God loves us so much He doesn't care how much we cost. He is just happy the we are in His Kingdom. Aren't you overcome by such love?

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