

Unworthy Servants

Luke 17:7-10

Introduction

Eat Your Food: Kids are funny.¹ Ever notice that the things kids *don't* want to do are the very things I want to do (e.g., nap time, snack time, bedtime)? Please give me a snack and tell me to take a nap!

- One of the appropriate things we parents do, especially in the early development stages, is applaud the very ordinary successes of our kids. We clap when they take a step, celebrate when they say a word, and dance with joy when they use the potty. That's all well and good; all of those 'firsts' deserve celebration. But wouldn't it be strange if that continued throughout your life?
- You see a strange shift, even in children. The applause goes from special to expected. They begin to think it's normal to be celebrated for doing the things they're supposed to do.
- The other night, I actually caught myself saying 'Good job!' to my youngest because... **he ate his dinner**. Think about that. My wife and I bought the food, cooked the food, put it on a plate in front of him, yet he's getting the accolades as if *he* did something!
- And as silly as that sounds, **how many of us treat God the same way?** We receive his grace and his gifts, and we act like we did something special. We act like he should be applauding us when we should be worshipping him.

Parabolic Recalibration: Jesus gives a strange parable that cuts against that grain of the way we do things.

- I'll be honest, when I first read this section, I wasn't sure what to make of it. But if you've been with us long, you know we don't skip strange passages, hard passages, or uncomfortable passages, even if it means preaching about demon-possession on Mother's Day.
- However, as we consider the context of the passage, it becomes strikingly clear what Jesus is saying: **faithful disciples don't demand thanks from God; they delight in serving him.**
 - The Entitlement We Expect
 - The Humility We Need
 - The Grace That Transforms

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'? 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'? ⁹ Does he thank the servant because he did what was commanded? ¹⁰

¹ I talk about my family a lot because I love them. Do you not want me to? But also, we live in a culture that often sees kids as an inconvenience or impediment to personal comfort rather than a blessing and a joy.

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.'"²

1. The Entitlement We Expect

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'? 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'? ⁹ Does he thank the servant because he did what was commanded?"

Context: "Context is king." "A text without context is a pretext for a proof-text."

- I actually heard someone once say, "Never read a Bible verse" (Koukl). That might be an overstatement, but it does make the point that no verse, story, or character exists in isolation in the Bible.
 - These books and letters are written to real people, in a real place in time, and they are connected, both within books and across the storyline of Scripture to teach us. If we are going to understand the Word of God, then we have to read it as it is written, paying attention to how it fits together and is intentionally arranged.
- "You cannot properly understand [Scripture] without seeing it first in its context, not ours."
- The **first layer of context** that helps us is this context of **servanthood** during that time.
 - The term translated as servant here can mean "slave, bondservant, or household servant."³
 - There were different types of servanthood and slavery in that day and throughout history.⁴ We see with the Roman conquest, prisoners of war were enslaved in mass. We've seen the horrors of slavery in modern times.
 - But among Jews within Israel and the kind most frequently described in the gospels, we see "household servants."
 - We see this servant described as overseeing tasks such as plowing, keeping sheep, and preparing a meal for his master.

Indentured Servanthood: We can understand the circumstances of such an arrangement.

- In Matthew 18⁵ Jesus tells a story about an unforgiving servant. A servant had been forgiven an enormous sum by the king (think billions), yet turns around and assaults and imprisons a fellow servant for a relatively small debt (think thousands). I simply want to point out the problem and punishment of a debt.⁶

² ⁷ Τίς δὲ ἐξ ὑμῶν δοῦλον ἔχων ἀροτριῶντα ἢ ποιμαίνοντα, ὃς εἰσελθόντι ἐκ τοῦ ἀγροῦ ἐρεῖ αὐτῷ, Εὐθέως παρελθὼν ἀνάπεσε, ⁸ ἀλλ' οὐχὶ ἐρεῖ αὐτῷ, Ἐτοίμασον τί δειπνήσω καὶ περιζωσάμενος διακόνει μοι ἕως φάγῳ καὶ πίῳ, καὶ μετὰ ταῦτα φάγεσαι καὶ πίεσαι σύ; ⁹ μὴ ἔχει χάριν τῷ δούλῳ ὅτι ἐποίησεν τὰ διαταχθέντα; ¹⁰ οὕτως καὶ ὑμεῖς, ὅταν ποιήσητε πάντα τὰ διαταχθέντα ὑμῖν, λέγετε ὅτι Δοῦλοι ἀχρεῖοί ἐσμεν, ὃ ὠφείλομεν ποιῆσαι πεπποιήκαμεν.

³ δοῦλος

⁴ Scripture acknowledges the reality of these systems but constantly calls for justice, restraint, and humane treatment (e.g., Exod 21; Eph 6:5–9; Col 4:1). The NT reframes servanthood with gospel dignity — Paul even calls himself a slave of Christ (Rom 1:1).

⁵ Matt 18:21-35

⁶ Matt 5:26, 18:30

- In the ancient world, there was little concept of long-term incarceration. The first and most common purpose of prison was to punish debtors and coerce payment (i.e., debtor's prison). However, this was not an optimal arrangement because someone couldn't earn money if they were in jail.
- The better arrangement would have been to work off the debt as a servant (think more indentured servitude).
- How backwards would it be, Jesus asserts, for the servant who owes the master money, to think the master should be serving him?

More Context: The next layer of perspective that helps us understand Jesus' point is the **literary context**.

- Luke goes to great lengths to explain Jesus' confrontation with the Pharisees, this group of hyper-religious Jews who were obsessed with minute rule-keeping and outward appearances, and ended up loving their own power and status more.
- One of the main sticking points for the Pharisees is the understanding of sin, sinners, and forgiveness, or more precisely, their assessment of their own sin *versus* the sin of others.
 - They question Jesus' wisdom when he not only allows but welcomes a woman with a sinful reputation to anoint his feet with an expensive ointment as an act of devotion and worship (Lk 7:36-39).
 - He challenges their attitude of self-justification, where they think they've proven their righteousness through supposed good behavior (Lk 10:25-37).
 - Their righteousness is nothing more than pretending. It's a shallow veneer of apparent good works over a deep well of sin (Lk 11:37-54).
 - In Luke 15, we see the Pharisees complaining that the *wrong* kind of people (e.g., tax collectors and sinners) are coming to Jesus.
- Jesus tells a famous story (**The Prodigal Son**), about a rebellious child who takes his inheritance and runs off and wastes it in reckless living, only to be undeservedly and graciously welcomed back to the Father.
 - He thinks he's messed up too much to come home as a **son**; the best he can hope for is to be demoted to a **servant**. But he hasn't lost his father's love, the father welcomes him back as a **son**.
 - But the *point* of that story isn't the rebellious son but his resentful **older brother**.
 - ²⁵ "Now his older son was in the field, and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶ And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. ²⁷ And he said to him, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back safe and sound.' ²⁸ But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him, ²⁹ but he answered his father, 'Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends. ³⁰ But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!' (Lk 15:25-30).

- The truth about the older brother (and the Pharisees, and many of us) is that he wanted the father's stuff, not the father.
- He judges his brother a wicked sinner and himself as a perfect rule-keeper deserving reward (I never disobeyed your command).
- This kind of attitude not only withholds grace from others it also prevents us from receiving the grace of God.
- **The older brother can't celebrate because he doesn't think he needs saving.** He can't rejoice in his father's mercy because he doesn't think he needs mercy. In his mind, sinners need grace, but good people deserve credit. And the gospel says the exact opposite — there are no good people, only sinners, and all of us desperately need grace.

Entitlement Thinking: The truth is, we all too often approach God with this same **entitlement reflex**. It is wired deep into our idolatrous hearts that love is based on performance.

- And because we desperately *want* grace we judge our performance on a sliding scale. We see our sin as incidental and others as inexcusable. We minimize our failures as 'mistakes' but magnify others' as 'character flaws.' "A very wise man is as good at detecting folly in his own thinking and behavior as he is at detecting it in others. A prideful man can find a fool everywhere except in the mirror" (Wagner).

God's grace is not found on the path of perfect performance but in the place of humble dependence.

2. The Humility We Need

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.'

Accurate Self-Assessment: Jesus reveals our true status; we are "unworthy servants".

- He doesn't say we are *worthless*, but that our behavior has not earned us a reward.
 - Worth is determined by how much someone is willing to pay. Jesus loved you so much that he paid the price of his own life for you.
 - This also means your value is dependent on your performance, but on Christ's. Your good behavior does not secure your righteousness, but Jesus' sacrificial death (e.g., U.S. dollars and government bonds are 'backed by the full faith and credit of the United States Government; the USA has a credit rating; your salvation is by faithfulness of God).
- The gospel inverts the way of the world. The world says if you perform and prove yourself, if you're good enough, smart enough, rich enough, then people will love you. The gospel says you're not "loved because you are lovely, but are lovely because you are loved" perfectly by Jesus.⁷
- **The gospel reminds us that we are worse than we like to imagine, but loved more than we dare hope.**

⁷ HT *The Jesus Storybook Bible*, Sally Lloyd-Jones

Humble: The way of the devil is pride, the way of the gospel is humility. The original lie of the serpent is that God is keeping us down rather than lifting us up, that we deserve what God won't give us, rather than recognizing we have been given infinitely more than we ever deserved.

- We have been told that the way to success is to believe in ourselves, promote ourselves, and make a name for ourselves; the gospel tells us to believe in Christ and humble ourselves.
- We think it's important to be important when self-promotion has no place in the kingdom of God. Either we entrust ourselves to God, or we try to do what only he can do.
 - Christians are as bad at celebrity worship as the world. Only Jesus is worthy to carry the weight of our worship.
- Pride sabotages our view of God, ourselves, and others. "We look down on others because we are not looking up at God" (Sally Lloyd-Jones). "Humility is the beginning of worship" because it takes our eyes off of ourselves and allows us to see Christ (Calvin).

Dutiful Delight: So, rather than the prideful servant who thinks his master owes him something, the wise servant will say: "We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty."

- That word "duty" gets a bad rap in our culture. We don't often like obligations and requirements.⁸ But there is a beauty and, dare I say, "delight" in doing your duty, your rightful obedience to God, not as a means of earning favor, but as the natural response of love to his gracious authority.
 - Newborn, 3 a.m., when the baby cries, no parent jumps up shouting, "Yes! I get to change another diaper!" It doesn't feel *delightful* in the moment. But any loving parent will tell you, it's a duty, but they do it gladly because it flows from love. The baby can't pay them back, but the parent doesn't keep score. It's not about earning points; it's about expressing love. In the same way, our obedience to God is not a burdensome obligation but a joyful duty. **Love isn't and can't be simple butterflies and goosebumps, but steady commitment expressed in faithful action.**
- Faithful obedience is simply giving God back what already belongs to Him (e.g., "it's *your* breath in *our* lungs, so we pour out *our* praise").
 - The strength, the gifts, the possessions, the talents, the creativity, the relationships, the experiences are gifts of a gracious God that you get to give back in joyful worship.
- Be careful: It's so easy for our ugly pride to jump up and steal what belongs to God for ourselves.
 - We think we are really something special. I preached a good sermon, God will be pleased. I shared the gospel, *pat on the back.
 - I heard Alistair Begg recount a note that someone wrote to him, saying, "Thank you for allowing God to use you." He was flabbergasted because they missed it. We should thank God for the privilege of allowing us to be used.
 - Don't **pity** the person who sells all they have to move and share the gospel. Don't **pity** the person who sacrifices their time and safety to serve

⁸ See also 1 Cor 9:15-18

in challenging places. Don't **pity** the person who says no to the American dream so they can say yes to God. **Pity yourself if you won't. They are not pitiable; they are privileged to join God in obedience, to get a front-row seat where God is working, to be near the one who is near the broken.**

- It all belongs to him; I'm just privileged to be a part of it. God owes us nothing; we owe him everything.

How can anyone have this perspective? The gospel transforms our obedience from duty to gratitude.

- Once you've internalized the truth of the gospel, the sacrifice of Jesus, the failures of your self-righteousness, and the enormity of your sin, you are completely humbled. For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast (Eph 2:8-9).

3. The Grace That Transforms

Experience: An experience of grace is the only thing powerful enough to make you **gracious**. An experience of forgiveness is the only thing powerful enough to inspire forgiveness.

- We are told to forgive "as God in Christ forgave" us (Eph 4:32, cf. Col 3:13).
- Much of the surrounding context aims to demonstrate to the Pharisees that their judgmental attitude, lack of grace, and unforgiving nature are a result of never having experienced the grace of God themselves.
 - If you think God owes you, rather than you owe God, you'll never be able to extend grace to other sinners.
- If you've never received the true, undeserved love of God in Christ, then you'll never be able to truly love another person. Your love will always be transactional, performance-based, and shallow.
- But when the gospel wrecks you, it remakes you.

John Newton's life is one of the clearest testimonies to the transforming power of grace. Raised in a Christian home, he turned from the faith and became a profane and violent man. He worked on slave ships and eventually captained them, trafficking human beings across the Atlantic. By his own admission, he sank into the "depths of sin and misery." But in the middle of a violent storm at sea in 1748, Newton cried out to God for mercy — and God answered. That experience of grace **broke** him and **remade** him.

- When many wanted to stay silent about the horrors of slavery, Newton spoke out. He published a powerful pamphlet called *Thoughts Upon the African Slave Trade*,⁹ in which he confessed his past and described in gruesome detail the atrocities of the Middle Passage. The pamphlet was widely distributed to every member of Parliament and became one of the most influential documents fueling the abolition movement.
- He became a mentor of William Wilberforce, encouraging him to dedicate himself to the fight against slavery. Newton lived long enough to see the Slave Trade Act of 1807

⁹ 1788

passed by Parliament, just months before his death. The former slave trader became an abolitionist.

- He never forgot the depths of his sin or the wonder of God's mercy, which is why he could pen words that have echoed for centuries: "Amazing grace! How sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me."
- **Grace turned an oppressor into a liberator.** Why? Because an experience of grace is the only thing powerful enough to make you gracious.

Servants as Kings: The problem in this parable, the problem with the Pharisees, and the problem with many of us, is that we are **servants acting like Kings**.¹⁰

- When you refuse to forgive that person who hurt you, you are a servant acting like a King.
- When you think your good behavior entitles you to extra blessings from God, you are a servant acting like a king.
- When you judge others as sinful and broken, but yourself as righteous and deserving, you are a servant acting like a king.

The reality that will break you of this pride is when you realize, internalize, and **believe in the King who became a servant**.

- ⁵ Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, ⁶ who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷ but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. ⁸ And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. ⁹ Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, ¹⁰ so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹ and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Phil 2:5-11).

The Gospel: When you experience the mercy of God in Christ, it breaks you and remakes you (e.g., deeply by grace, truly by faith). There are possibilities in Jesus Christ for love that are revolutionary, that you can find nowhere else.

- The love we have in Jesus is completely unique. Nothing you can do can make God love you more and nothing you can do can make God love you less. "God shows his love for us" (not when we have it all together) but "while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom 5:8). **This is the gospel!** For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God (2 Cor 5:21).
- This is the great exchange of the gospel: "We dare assure ourselves that eternal life, of which Jesus is the heir, is ours and can no more be taken from us than from him; we cannot be condemned for our sins, because he has pardoned us, since he took them on himself as his own. What an exchange!?! By taking our mortality, he has given his immortality; taking our weakness, he has strengthened us by his power; taking our iniquity on himself, he has clothed us with his righteousness" (Calvin).
- **The real test of faith isn't how much you think you've done for God, but whether you know what He has done for you.**

¹⁰ HT Keller

Conclusion:

Diagnostic Questions:

- Do I pray, serve, and give as if God owes me, or as if I have already received his greatest gift in Christ?
- Do I think my standing before God rests on my performance or on Christ's finished work?
- Do I measure others by my standards or by Christ's grace?
- Do I love others the way Christ loved me, or only when it's convenient?

Invitation:

- If entitlement has crept in, repent.
- If bitterness has taken root, forgive.
- If shame has chained your heart, receive Christ's mercy.
- If pride has convinced you that you are the king of your life, bow to the King of the universe who became a servant to save you.

Find the joy of serving God, not in demanding his applause, but delighting in his grace.