

“Unworthy Slaves”

Luke 17:7-10

**Baxter T. Exum (#1029)
Four Lakes Church of Christ
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Introduction:

This morning I would like for us to consider a rather difficult statement that was made by Jesus and is recorded for us in only one of the four gospel accounts—in **Luke 17**. In our pew Bibles, the passage is found on **page 1634**, and the difficult statement comes in the form of a very short story—a story about a servant. We understand that God often uses the slave and master relationship to help us understand some very important lessons. In the Old Testament, for example, Jesus is described in **Isaiah 53** as being the **“Suffering Servant.”** And certainly that was true. Jesus Himself said that He, **“...*did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many*”** (**Matthew 20:28**), a direct fulfillment of **Isaiah 53**.

We remember Jesus teaching a lesson on forgiveness by using the parable of the Unmerciful Servant in **Matthew 18**, a short story where a king forgave a slave of his enormous debt, but then that slave who had been forgiven turned around and tortured a fellow slave for not having paid back a much smaller amount. We remember the parable of the laborers in the vineyard. The landowner went out and hired people to work all day in the vineyard, they agreed to the terms and worked. A few hours later, the landowner went out and hired others, and so on throughout the day, and at the end of the day they were all paid the same amount. Those who had worked all day were mad, and Jesus then used the story to warn about the danger of envy, and His conclusion came in **Matthew 20:16**, **“*So the last shall be first, and the first last.*”** We remember the parable of the talents in **Matthew 25**, the short story where a wealthy man was about to go on a long journey and left varying amounts of wealth with each of his three servants. Some took the money and invested it and multiplied it, but one servant was scared and went and hid it in the ground. The Lord used that story to teach the importance of responsibility and hard work.

And once again, here in **Luke 17**, He uses the picture of a slave to teach a valuable spiritual lesson. **▶PPT▶** Again, it is a difficult and demanding story, but as we look at it together, I would like for us to notice in the Lord’s conclusion that we are very clearly identified as the slave in this story. The lesson, then, is not about the attitude of the master, but the lesson is about the attitude of the servant. And so I would like for us to ask ourselves: What should be our *attitude* in the service we render to God? If you will, then, please look with me at **Luke 17:7-10**, the words of Jesus to His disciples...

⁷ "Which of you, having a slave plowing or tending sheep, will say to him when he has come in from the field, 'Come immediately and sit down to eat'? ⁸ "But will he not say to him, 'Prepare something for me to eat, and properly clothe yourself and serve me while I eat and drink; and afterward you may eat and drink'? ⁹ "He does not thank the slave because he did the things which were commanded, does he? ¹⁰ "So you too, when you do all the things which are commanded you, say, 'We are unworthy slaves; we have done only that which we ought to have done.' "

This morning as we look back over these four verses, I would like for us to consider four basic ideas—four basic ideas concerning the proper attitude and what it really means to be a servant of God.

I. **And right away, we notice at the beginning of verse 7 that THE WORK OF A SERVANT IS NOT ALWAYS GLAMOROUS OR SENSATIONAL.**

»PPT»

In fact, we look at the word that Jesus uses here, and it refers literally not to an employee but to a slave or a bond-servant. The word refers to a slave who is attached to his owner. And we find in verse 7 that this particular slave is personally responsible for plowing or tending sheep. And so again, this is not a glamorous position—this is not like a servant who may be serving some king at a great banquet, this is not like a servant who carries the king's chair through the streets—this is not like a servant who is responsible for gently waving the palm branch over the king's throne—this is not a position of honor, but the slave in verse 7 is someone who gets dirty, someone who works his or her fingers to the bone and someone who never gets any kind of recognition—someone who is perhaps never even seen by others—someone who works behind the scenes—backbreaking work—the idea here is of someone who works from sun-up to sun-down—someone who gets up at the crack of dawn, works all day, and then does it all over again the next day.

By the end of this little paragraph, Jesus clearly compares us to the slaves in this situation. And perhaps at this point, someone will say, **"Well, that is insulting! We are not slaves—not even to God!"** And yet the writers of the New Testament often referred to themselves as being slaves of the Lord. We think of the apostle Paul in Romans 1:1, where he referred to himself as, ***"Paul, a bond-servant of Christ Jesus, called as an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God."*** Paul uses the same word that the Lord used back in Luke 17:7—a slave or a bond-servant. We think of James, the Lord's own half-brother. In James 1:1, James referred to himself as, ***"James, a bond-servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ."*** In Jude 1, Jude also refers to himself as, ***"Jude, a bond-servant of Jesus Christ."*** In Revelation 1, the apostle John starts the book by saying, ***"The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show to His bond-servants, the things which must soon take place; and He sent and communicated it by His angel to His bond-servant John, who testified to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw."***

We find, then, that the First Century Christians, even the apostles, were not ashamed to be known as slaves of God. Someone might say, **“Well, that really presents a terrible view of God! What about all of those passages that refer to the love of God?”** However, the parable here in **Luke 17** was written from the slave’s point of view. As God’s servants, what should our attitude be in the service that we offer? And the point is: We are to serve God and put His wishes first (before our own).

Unfortunately, sometimes in the church we go looking for **“volunteers.”** I am reminded of a story about a biker who was converted to the Lord, and as this type of story always goes, he was a huge man, long hair, covered with tattoos, and when he went to church that first Sunday, the preacher announced that he was looking for volunteers to work in the nursery. They had a lot of children, but few people to staff the nursery, so they needed some help. The announcement had no effect, and so later in the service, the preacher made the same announcement again. This time, the biker guy started to think about it, but he said to himself, “Okay, if the preacher announces it a third time, I’ll take that as a sign from God that I should volunteer to staff the nursery.” No one volunteered, and so right at the end of the service, the preacher announced it one more time, the biker guy raises his hand, and immediately almost 50 other hands went up—every mother’s hand went up—none of them wanted to leave their children alone in the nursery! That’s what happens when we ask for volunteers.

However, there is a huge difference between a servant and a volunteer. A volunteer picks and chooses when and where he or she will serve. But a servant serves no matter what. A volunteer serves when it is convenient, but a servant does whatever is necessary. As far as I can tell, the word **“volunteer”** is never used in the Bible. The Lord never called for volunteers, but He did call for servants. Sometimes when trying to get something done, we try to convince people by telling them how easy it will be, **“Oh come on, you can teach this class—it only takes a couple of hours to get ready for it,”** or, **“Come on, it will be fun to sort tons of clothing for the give away,”** or, **“It will be fun to serve as a cook at Bible camp,”** and so on. But no, sometimes things are not fun, and that is okay, because the Lord is looking for bond-servants. The Lord is looking for those who will serve no matter what, for those who will do what needs to be done—even though it may not be glamorous or exciting.

II. As we look back at this brief parable in Luke 17, we discover not only that the work of a servant may not be exciting, but we also find that THE WORK OF A SERVANT IS OFTEN LONG AND DIFFICULT, IT OFTEN REQUIRES A LONG-TERM AND SUSTAINED COMMITMENT. »PPT»

At the end of **verse 7** and into **verse 8**, Jesus invites us into this hypothetical situation first as the master. He is not telling us to act this way, but based on common practice at the time, the Lord seems to ask a rhetorical question. After working hard in the fields all day, the master will not tell the servant to come in to relax and eat, because the servant still has work to do. The slave is then expected not to take a rest, but to get busy working on dinner! And so the servant’s role may change a little bit as he moves from outdoors to indoors, from daylight to evening, as

he moves from hard labor to home life, but the work keeps on coming, as he serves whenever and wherever, doing whatever it is that the master requires.

For just a moment, we need to apply this to our Christian lives. The Lord is not looking for people to take a few hours every weekend, the Lord is not looking for volunteers, but He is looking for servants who will dedicate themselves to doing His will at every opportunity from now to eternity. I know it is so tempting for us to think that we have already put our time in, that we have already done the hard labor, and maybe now we feel we can take some time to sit back and relax a bit. And yet if we are alive, we are still servants of the Lord! The work may change, but there is still something we can do, and the service goes on for a lifetime. The message of **verse 8** is that a slave can never say that his work is done. He is always on call, even after working all day in the field—he is on call 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year.

I am reminded of a little girl who learned how to tie her shoes—obviously a huge breakthrough moment in her life—she should have been happy about it, but she was crying. Her dad asked her why she was crying, and the little girl said, **“Because now, I am going to have to do this for the rest of my life!”** She realized that she had just taken on a lifetime responsibility! Perhaps some Christians are like this—there is certainly some excitement to serving, or teaching a class, or helping out in some way—but perhaps there is a little dread as well, because we realize that we will be doing it over and over again for the rest of our lives. And when that dread settles in, perhaps we should remember Paul’s encouragement in **1 Corinthians 15:58**. After discussing the resurrection, Paul closed **1 Corinthians 15** by saying, ***“Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord.”***

In fact, it has been said that the reward for faithful service is more service. When we find someone to serve at Bible camp, for example, I often remind them that serving at camp is a **“life sentence.”** In other words, once they say **“Yes,”** then I have the right to harass them from here to eternity! Yes, there is a time of rest coming, but as we learned in our Scripture reading this morning from **Revelation 22:3**, that even in heaven, the Lord’s bond-servants will serve Him for eternity—we will see His face and there will no longer be any night. We will never get tired, our bodies will never get sore, but we will serve the Lord forever. All of the things that made our service here difficult will be taken away. But the lesson in **verses 7-8** in the parable is that our service is long-term, that our service to God involves a long-term commitment.

III. As we continue looking at this very difficult little parable, we need to notice something in verse 9, and that is: A SERVANT WORKS WITHOUT EXPECTING TO BE THANKED. »PPT»

And again, this is not a lesson for masters. This is not a lesson for us that when someone does something for us that we are not to be thankful. A Christian *will* express his thanks to the server at the restaurant, to the cashier at Culver’s, to the

checker at Wal-Mart. This, though, is a lesson from the point of view of the servant. From the point of view of the servant, we as Christians are to do our work without expecting a **“thank you.”** Certainly, after working all day in the fields, and after preparing the meal, a simple “thank you” would have meant so much to this slave, and it’s not as if the master should not have done this, but the point here is that the slave is not to expect it. As slaves, our service is not conditional upon us feeling appreciated. Can you imagine a slave saying to his master, **“No, I don’t think I’m going to feed you dinner tonight, because I do not really feel appreciated around here.”** No! The point here is that the slave is not entitled to a big mushy thank you! Certainly a **“thank you”** is a great bonus, but slaves do not serve simply because they feel appreciated. The **“thank you”** is not expected. Feeling appreciated is not a condition of their service.

For just a moment, let us try to apply this to our situation as bond-servants of the Lord. As Christians, it is so easy to get upset when no one seems to notice what we have done. And so if no one says **“thank you,”** then we are tempted to get angry, we are tempted to give up, we are tempted to never serve again.

Again, from both a practical and a Scriptural point of view, it is good to encourage and appreciate one another. As the writer of Hebrews puts it in Hebrews 3:13, ***“But encourage one another day after day, as long as it is still called ‘Today,’ so that none of you will be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.”*** But as slaves, this encouragement, this appreciation, is not a condition of our service.

Especially here in our society, we are often consumed with our **“rights.”** We think we are entitled to a word of thanks. If we do something, somebody had better notice it. But please look with me at Jesus’ question in verse 9, ***“He does not thank the slave because he did the things which were commanded, does he?”*** And the implied answer is **“No!”** We normally say **“thank you”** to someone for being generous, to someone who goes above and beyond. But the slave has simply done that which was commanded.

Coming up here in a few weeks, our family will send yet another quarterly check to the IRS—15.3% of our salary for Social Security. We plan on paying that on time, we will fill out the form, we will make sure all of the math is correct, we will write the check, we will faithfully address the envelope, we will even put a stamp on it—but as with the past 16 years we’ve been doing this, we do not expect a thank you note. In 16 years, we have never received a thank you from the president. We do not get a “thank you,” because we are simply doing what we have been commanded to do. Now, if we skip that check, we will hear from the government, but when we send it faithfully as we always have—nothing!

As we apply this to our Christian service, we think about everything we do for God—we read the Bible, we worship, we teach a class, we clean, we mow, we sort clothing, we cook, we visit, we serve at camp—even after doing all of these things, the Lord does not owe us anything. The Lord does not owe us a **“thank you.”** He does not owe us, because we are simply doing what we have been commanded to do.

Well, I know we do not always like thinking about it in those terms. But from time to time we run into someone (perhaps weak in the faith), but someone who gets discouraged and says, **“Well, you know, I don’t get the warm fuzzy feeling when I serve.”** Jesus is saying here, though, that the warm fuzzy feeling is not a requirement for Christian service. We should be able to serve without feeling appreciated. It’s not about us! So we learn, then, that as servants we should be able to serve even when we do not necessarily feel like it.

We think about Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane on the night before He was murdered. As He knelt there sweating blood, He did not say, **“Oh, I feel so good about this!”** He did not say, **“Oh, I have such a warm, fuzzy feeling.”** He did not say, **“Oh, I feel so appreciated by these people!”** No, but three times, sweating blood, He asked for this cup to pass, and then He said, **“Your will be done.”**

IV. Before we move on, we should also consider a final lesson—this one comes from verse 10, and the basic idea is that A SERVANT DOES WHAT IS EXPECTED. »PPT»

In verse 10, the Lord says, **“So you too, when you do all the things which are commanded you, say, ‘We are unworthy slaves; we have done only that which we ought to have done.’”** What a powerful statement! It is here that the Lord makes a direct application, **“So you too....”** In other words, this is what it means. After we have lived the Christian life, after we have done everything perfectly, after we have worked hard—even after all of this, we are not to have a feeling of entitlement, the Lord does not “owe” us salvation, but our attitude is to be that we are **“unworthy slaves.”** We are nothing, and God is everything. As the Bible puts it in Psalm 123:2, **“Behold, as the eyes of servants look to the hand of their master, as the eyes of a maid to the hand of her mistress, so our eyes look to the LORD our God, until He is gracious to us.”** Or, as we might put it today, when the master says, **“Jump,”** we say, **“How high?”** We do not hesitate, or complain, or bargain, or debate, but we respond as Samuel did in 1 Samuel 3:9, **“Speak, LORD, for Your servant is listening.”**

In verse 10, the Lord uses the term **“unworthy slaves.”** The word **“unworthy”** refers to someone who is not deserving of praise, and we do not deserve it, because even if we do everything right in the Christian life, we have still only done what we have been commanded to do. Even at our very best, we are unworthy.

Years ago, I remember just happening to notice a Christian who was not partaking of the Lord’s Supper. Normally I don’t pay much attention to what is going on around me during the Lord’s Supper, but for some reason I happened to look up and see this man pass the tray by without partaking of the bread. I asked him about it later, and he said, **“I am not worthy.”** And my response to him was, **“None of us are worthy! That is the whole point of taking the Lord’s Supper.”** His misunderstanding went back to Paul’s words in 1 Corinthians 11:27, **“Therefore whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner, shall be guilty of the body and the blood of the Lord.”** And so we

discussed the fact that Paul was not saying that we had to be worthy of the Lord's Supper, but that we had to partake of it in a worthy manner. In other words, we need to pay attention to what we are doing. I mean, if we need to be worthy, then we might as well leave the grape juice in the refrigerator downstairs.

But the point is, even if we could somehow be perfect Christians for a lifetime, even then we have only done what has been commanded, and we have no right to demand that God let us into heaven. God is not our slave—we are God's slaves.

As Christians, it is enough that we have been rescued from the bondage of sin, but let us not start getting proud of ourselves and think that God somehow owes us something because we have been so good. As Paul said in **1 Corinthians 6:19-20**, ***"Or do you not know...that you are not your own? For you have been bought with a price...."*** As slaves of God, we have been purchased with the blood of His only Son, and our response is to fall down at the foot of the cross—thanking God for what He has done.

Conclusion:

This morning, then, I would like for us to think back over this little parable, and I'd like for us to ask ourselves how we can have the attitude of a servant this week—What can we do? As far as our attitude is concerned we have learned that...

- The work of a servant is not always glamorous, but it is often quite difficult.
- The work of a servant is long-term and often makes us very tired.
- A servant does not expect to be thanked for what he or she is doing.
- And finally, a servant simply does what is expected and simply obeys whatever the master says to do.

These are all some very valuable lessons—we need to let it all sink in. Before we close, however, I would say that if this parable were all we knew about God, that we would have a rather unbalanced picture, that we would actually have a false view of God. Remember, this parable is meant to adjust the attitude of the servants.

But for a little insight into the character of the master, I would invite you to turn back with me just a few chapters, to **Luke 12**. In **Luke 12**, Jesus told another parable—a parable with a greater emphasis on the master. If you will, please look with me at **Luke 12:35-38**. In **Luke 12:35-38**, the Lord said to His disciples, ***"Be dressed in readiness, and keep your lamps lit. Be like men who are waiting for their master when he returns from the wedding feast, so that they may immediately open the door to him when he comes and knocks. Blessed are those slaves whom the master will find on the alert when he comes; truly I say to you, that he will gird himself to serve, and have them recline at the table, and will come up and wait on them. Whether he comes in the second watch, or even in the third, and finds them so, blessed are those slaves."***

This morning, we are waiting for the Master to return, and He is a Master who is preparing a meal for His servants! We prepare for His coming by believing in Jesus

as God's Son, by turning away from our sins, and by allowing ourselves to be immersed in water for the forgiveness of sins. Even when we have done these things, we are not worthy, we are not in a position to make demands of God, but we have been obedient. If you would like to talk about it further, we hope you will let us know. But if you are ready to obey the good news right now, you can come to the front as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: church@fourlakescoc.org