

Stories that Change the World

“On Servanthood: The Parable of the Unworthy Servants”

Luke 17:7-10

~ Delivered at Central Baptist Church on June 25, 2017 by Pastor Barton Priebe

INTRODUCTION

- **(SHOW SLIDE 1)** Please open your Bibles to Luke 17.
- This week's parable is difficult to hear simply because it rubs British Columbians the wrong way.
 - Jesus is speaking about what a Christian looks like and He says it has everything to do with servanthood, masters, obedience, and authority. He even uses a four-letter word: *duty*.
 - Duty is something you do regardless of whether it leads to your personal happiness and fulfillment or not. Such subjects are not very popular on the Westcoast.
- Westcoast people are marked by a free spirited individualism that does not make choices based on duty or some authority figure but on what makes one feel happy and fulfilled. In fact, Mark Wexler, the chair of the graduate business school at Simon Fraser University, shows that people are often motivated to immigrate to the Westcoast by a desire to get away from constricting forms of authority that they faced elsewhere.
 - We see this in people's spiritual beliefs. People in British Columbia are less likely to be involved in organized religion than anywhere else in the country. Westcoast people do value spirituality but it is individual and private, free from any authority that says you must believe or act a certain way.
 - To Westcoast people this parable feels like jumping into a mountain river. It is a little shocking to our sensibilities. But I submit to you that just as you come out of that freezing water feeling more alive than ever, Jesus' words will at first shock your sensibilities but if you embrace them you will find more fulfillment and happiness than you have ever known.
- In Luke 17 Jesus is speaking to his disciples about what it means to be a Christian – a follower of Jesus. In verses 1-3 he says a Christian is careful not to cause others to sin. In verses 4-5 he says the Christian is marked by unlimited forgiveness and in verse 6 He says a Christian is one who exercises faith.
 - Jesus then tells a parables that gives four further marks of what a Christian looks like. Let's jump in together.

MARK #1 – A SERVANT OF JESUS THE MASTER

- **(SHOW SLIDE 2)** The first mark is this: A Christian views him or her self as a servant of Jesus the master.
 - Master is not the only image of God that we must have but it is a critical one. In Jesus' other parables we learn about God as Father, Judge, King and Bridegroom. In these other images we are the children of God or the bride of Christ. In today's image we are servants of God our master.
 - So God is much more than a master but He is certainly not less. Christians are much more than servants but we are not less.
- Jesus reveals this master/slave metaphor by telling a story about a farmer who has one servant, meaning he had one slave. We react to this image because we import our modern ideas of slavery onto the story and so we feel sorry for this slave when we shouldn't. He doesn't feel sorry for himself and neither should we.



- You see old world slavery is quite different from the new world slavery of Great Britain and the United States. People became slaves for many reasons but one of the main reasons was because of debt. If you owed someone money and could not repay them there was no such thing as bankruptcy and so your creditor had every right to throw you in prison until you paid the debt. We saw this in the parable of the unmerciful servant in Matthew 18.
 - A far better option was for your creditor to take you as a slave where you would work to pay off your debt and if you could do this to gain your freedom. As a slave the master would also provide food and shelter for you and your family. So although not ideal, this was a pretty good deal for some. Many slaves were treated harshly but others had benevolent masters. As we will see, there is no reason to think the master in this parable is harsh or that the slave is not grateful to serve his master.
- So a Christian is one who believes that because of sin they were in such deep debt to God that they could never pay it off. A Christian believes that although God would have been just to cast them into eternal prison He did not. Rather, God our gracious Master had His own Son pay off the debt we owe. Jesus voluntarily paid our debt on the cross.
 - God does not ask us to pay back our debt was too large to repay. He simply paid the price Himself and now asks us to serve Him. A Christian then is one who bows before such a gracious master and says, ***“I am your servant for life.”***
- Do you remember in the movie version of the *The Count of Monte Cristo* when the main character Edmund Dantes is forced into a knife fight to the death with the smuggler named Jacopo. He wins but spares Jacopo’s life. Jacopo grabs his shirt and vows to serve him saying, ***“I swear . . . I am your man forever.”***
 - So right away we are called to examine our lives. Is Jesus your master? Are you his servant? Have you seen what He has done for you and joyfully bowed the knee to him saying, ***“I am yours forever. Command me as you will”***?
 - A Christian views him or her self as a servant of Jesus the master.

MARK #2 – DUTIES TO FULFILL TO JESUS THE MASTER

- It is in the second mark of a Christian that Jesus uses the four-letter word. In the second place (**SHOW SLIDE 3**) a Christian believes that he or she must perform duties for Jesus the master.
 - In this parable Jesus asks a question that has an obvious answer. **READ 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’?”*** To modernize it let me ask you, if a teenager gets a job at McDonalds, does his manager say to him after his first 2 hours, ***“Nice job, here is your paycheque for the week. Go home and enjoy yourself?”*** Of course not. The teenager has more duties to fulfill before he is done and gets paid.
 - So also this slave has not finished his duties when he has finished in the field. He knows it is also his duty to make supper for his master. When that is completed then he is free to eat and relax. **READ 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.’ ”***
- Duties are obligations that you are required to fulfill regardless of how you feel or what consequences may come for doing so. As His servants, Jesus says we have duties to perform. For instance, we are required by our master to worship God, to turn the other cheek, to forgive, to love, to tithe, to be honest, to be patient, to care for the poor, to love our spouses, to be content, to be generous, to be sexually pure, to pray, and to submit to the governing authorities.



- A Christian does not act then on the basis of what will make them happy and fulfilled but on the basis of what Jesus their master requires of them.
- On the Westcoast this is very countercultural. So why do we have such a hard time with this idea of duty?
 - I think it is partly because of the generation we live in. My grandfather, for instance, did not go around asking what would make him happy and fulfilled. He believed that he had certain duties to God, family, church, and country that he must fulfill regardless of how he feels – like laying his life on the line in WWII.
 - The 60's and Woodstock changed all that. If you grew up post-Woodstock you were raised in a culture that said your highest duty is to yourself, that your only master is yourself, and that your highest duty is to pursue your own happiness and fulfillment.
- But after 40 years of this all the literature is now reporting that as a generation we are more unhappy and disillusioned than our grandparents even though we are better off. Why is that? Many people argue that it is precisely because we were raised without religion that we are unhappy.
 - Douglas Coupland, a Vancouver based author wrote a famous little book entitled, *Life After God*. He says, ***"You are the first generation raised without religion. What happens if we are raised without religion and beliefs?"***¹
 - Coupland then shows how growing up in North Vancouver with parents who tried to live clean of any belief systems and duties left him empty. He and his friends could find no meaning in life, could not stay in relationships, and he felt lonely to the core.
- This disillusionment makes sense. Follow me on this: if you grow up in a society that believes this world is all there is then you will throw off duty and strive for happiness in this life because it is the only time you get. But you will quickly fall into despair because this life simply does not provide what we are looking for.
 - Other generations were happier because they did not expect this world to provide happiness. They believed in another world after this one.
 - Therefore, the issue was not me and my happiness but rather how do I live so that I rightly line up with the world to come. The values of the next life became the duties for this life. And it did not matter if those duties did not provide happiness. They were right and good and should be followed and any unhappiness would be made up for in the next life.
- So I am trying to show you that in rejecting God our generation has failed and has not found happiness in rejecting God as our master. But this is not just a generational thing; it is a human race thing. You see at the very root of our struggle with this idea of duty is the most ancient lie of all: that God's duties for us hinder human freedom and therefore God is not really a loving master.
 - Is that not the lie that Adam and Eve believed and the lie that you believe every time you reject God's duties? The serpent suggested that their duty not to eat from the tree was holding them back from experiencing what it meant to be truly human. And if God their master would impose such cruel duties then he must not really love them.
 - It was an attack on the master's character and an invitation to be their own masters and seek happiness through their own self-made duties. But the liberating truth is that all duties that God gives us are for our good to protect and enhance our humanness.

¹ Douglas Coupland, *Life After God*, quotation from inside the dust jacket.



- Like any good father, God gives rules to his kids but let me tell you, even though my kids often cannot see it, all of my rules are for their good. Never do I create a rule just to ruin their fun or crush their spirits.
 - I have taken all this time on God as master and our duties as servants because at the root of all your unhappiness and sin is a struggle with this concept of God as master and your duties before Him.
 - We chaff at this concept because we do not believe the duties God lays upon us are good and therefore we do not believe our master is good. But the path to freedom and joy comes when you see the goodness of your master and therefore the goodness of what he commands you to do.
- So to recap everything so far, a Christian views themselves as a servant to Jesus the master and also believes that he or she must perform duties for Jesus the master.

MARK #3 – TOTAL OBEDIENCE TO JESUS THE MASTER

- Let's press this home in application with the third mark. In the third place then **(SHOW SLIDE 4)** A Christian strives for total obedience to Jesus the master.
 - The servant did not obey his duties only half way. He did not come in the house and sit down. He went and made supper. Notice now verse 10. **READ 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.'*
 - Everything. Slaves do not make conditions or qualifications to their master's commands. A slave does not obey only when he understands, or when it will make him happy. If you obey God only when you feel like it you are not obeying. You are only agreeing and you are still the master of your life.
- This is the point of Robert Munger's famous little story entitled *My Heart Christ's Home*. He pictures the heart as a house and when Jesus moved in his life was radically changed.
 - *"In the joy of this new relationship I said to Jesus Christ, 'Lord, I want this heart of mine to be Yours. I want to have You settle down here and be perfectly at home. Everything I have belongs to You.'*
 - As Jesus moves in to the various rooms He points out things that need to be cleaned up. For instance in the living room there are magazines that should not be there. With Jesus' help he obeys, cleaning them out and finding the joy of obedience.
- *"One day I found Him waiting for me at the door. . . . As I entered, He said to me, 'There is a peculiar odor in the house. Something must be dead around here. It's upstairs. I think it is in the hall closet.' As soon as He said this, I knew what He was talking about. There was a small closet up there on the hall landing, just a few feet square. In that closet, behind lock and key, I had one or two little personal things that I did not want anyone to know about . . . I knew they were dead and rotting things left over from the old life.*
 - *Reluctantly, I went up with Him, and as we mounted the stairs the odor became stronger and stronger. He pointed to the door. I was angry. That's the only way I can put it. I had given Him access to the library, the dining room, the living room, the workroom, the rec room, and now He was asking me about a little two-by-four closet. I said to myself, 'This is too much. I am not going to give Him the key.'*
- *'Well,' He said, reading my thoughts, 'if you think I'm going to stay up here on the second floor with this smell, you are mistaken. I will go out on the porch.' Then I saw Him start down the stairs. When*



one comes to know and love Christ, the worst thing that can happen is to sense Him withdrawing His fellowship. I had to give in. 'I'll give You the key,' I said sadly, 'but You will have to open the closet and clean it out. I haven't the strength to do it.'

- *'Just give me the key,' He said. . . . With trembling fingers I passed the key to Him. He took it, walked over to the door, opened it, entered, took out all the putrefying stuff that was rotting there, and threw it away. Then He cleaned the closet and painted it. . . . Oh, what victory and release to have that dead thing out of my life!'*
 - A Christian strives for total obedience to Jesus the master. What is the closet in your life? Your master calls you to trust him that His commands are good. Will you obey today?

MARK #4 – OBEDIENCE IS NOT TO GAIN FAVOUR

- The fourth mark of a Christian is this: **(SHOW SLIDE #5)** A Christian obeys out of delight (not in order to achieve acceptance) for Jesus, the Master.
 - So far I have only been drawing out the broad themes of the parable and trying to clear away some of the cultural baggage we impose on it. But now let's come to really explain it's meaning because it seems a little odd.
 - Seems like Jesus is saying, *"do your duty and don't expect any thanks from me"* but that is not the case.
- Jesus begins by putting us in the mind of the master. He asks three questions that have obvious answers. First, if a servant came home at supper would a master say, *"Go get changed, relax, and enjoy some supper?"* Of course not. His duties are only half done. That would be like a waitress bringing you the menus and immediately asking for the tip. Her job is not done yet.
 - Jesus asks a second question in verse 8. **READ 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'?* The obvious answer is, *"yes, of course."* The servant will eat but only when he completed his duties.
- Jesus then asks a third question in verse 9. **READ 9** - *Does he thank the servant because he did what was commanded?* Now here is the heart of the matter. Jesus is not speaking against common courtesy as if the master does not thank him for making supper. The word 'thanks' is a good literal interpretation but it does not capture the essence of the thought.
 - Jesus is asking, *"Does the master owe the servant anything for doing his duty? Is the master indebted to his slave?"* The obvious answer is 'of course not' because it is the slave's job to make dinner for his master.
- Think of it this way: if you are a CEO and one of your employees works faithfully for you for an entire year does the employee then have the right to demand usage of your boat and cabin up at the lake? Of course not. Why? Because your employee is just doing their job. You don't owe them anything. You may reward them out of generosity just as God will reward us but you do not owe them anything.
 - If you were the Queen and someone wrote you saying, *"I have not committed one single crime in my life and therefore believe I deserve to be awarded the Order of Canada."* What would you say? *"That is ridiculous. You have only done what is required of you."*
- The point is obvious is it not? You do not gain favour and merit by doing what you are told. You do not put God in your debt because you obey him. And that is why Jesus says that even after you have



done everything you should say, **READ 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.'* ”

- Unworthy does not mean you think you are useless to God. God's people are of great worth to Him. It is rather an expression of humility that says, ***“Jesus, you are my master and I am your servant. I do not believe that my faithful service gets me more favour with you. I do not believe my faithful service puts you in my debt. I have only done what you asked.”***
- Do you see how liberating and inspiring this is then?
 - It is liberating because it clearly states that you cannot earn your master's favour even if you do all your duties perfectly. God does not relate to you on the basis of your performance. This frees you from the inevitable pride that such thinking brings.
 - As a person matures spiritually and starts to forgive, to exercise faith, and obey Jesus there is a danger in feeling that because you have done all this for Jesus, he owes you a good life. There is a danger to think that now he must really love you but God does now owe you anything and His love is not based on your performance.
 - This will also save you from despair when you fail to obey because you know the master's love is not based on your perfect obedience.
- This is also incredibly inspiring because when you see that God's favour is not dependent on your performance duty ceases to be drudgery and rather becomes a delight.
 - When you see that Jesus has paid your debt entirely and that you do not have to work hard to pay God back in order to earn his favour duty becomes a joy. This is what John Newton is getting at in his famous hymn *Love Constrained to Obedience* - **(SHOW SLIDE #6)** ***“How long beneath the law I lay, In bondage and distress; I toil'd the precept to obey, But toil'd without success...To see the law by Christ fulfilled, And hear His pardoning voice, Changes a slave into a child, And duty into choice.”***
 - What gives you the power and joy to obey is seeing that Jesus paid your debt, that Jesus fulfilled the law for you so that you do not have to try and earn God's favour. A Christian has God's favour. Duty ceases to be drudgery. Duty becomes delight.
- You see this illustrated in a man who is deeply in love. That guy will do things he never would have before. He gives up time with his other friends to be with her. He gives up his money to buy her flowers and dinner. He does special things for her. If she asks him to do something he does it without complaint.
 - To others else it seems like he has lost his freedom. The cynic calls marriage a ball and chain. But ask such a man if he considers these duties to be drudgery and he will look at you with a blank face. He will say, ***“Are you crazy. I don't even think of these as duties. They are my delight.”***
 - But the man in love knows he is more free and more fulfilled than ever. To him, her wish is his command.
- This is the big secret: remember that religion says, ***“I obey and therefore I am accepted.”*** The gospel says, ***“I am accepted because of what Jesus has done and therefore I obey.”*** The gospel does not simply say, ***“I am accepted because of what Jesus has done.”*** It says, ***“And therefore, I obey.”*** The obedience arises out of the acceptance and not vice versa.
 - Are you struggling to find obedience a delight? Perhaps you have been relating to God on the basis of your performance. How do you find joy in obedience? By seeing the love of your master for you. Look to your crucified master.



- At the cross you see that your master is for you not against you. At the cross you see he paid the debt that you owe so that you do not have to obey to gain his favour. In his resurrection you see that God accepted his payment. You are already accepted into his house. He has already provided for your dinner. Let this love melt your heart and let love constrain you to obedience.

