

## Doing Duty • Luke 17:7–10

Jesus must have depressed his disciples when he spoke the words recorded in Luke 17:1, “Temptations to sin are sure to come.” Although we may resolve that we will avoid all temptations to sin, they are inevitable. They will be there, not just at work but at home as well. We can’t even keep them out by cloistering ourselves from the world. Even when we are able to close off the environment of our immediate home, temptations to sin are present in the recesses of our hearts and minds. They are there even when we gather together as God’s people to worship.

When his disciples heard this sobering truth I would assume that it was difficult news to listen to because there is a sense in all of us who are committed to God that someday we will be beyond temptations. Jesus seems to shatter all that with the announcement that temptations are sure to come. His disciples respond in Luke 17:5 by saying, “Increase our faith!” In other words, “God, give us help and give us hope.”

It was in this context of temptation that Jesus spoke a 97-word parable. In my mind it is a strange and somewhat difficult parable. Unlike many of the others that we have studied it is not upbeat or encouraging; in fact, at first reading it seems to be downright bleak. But upon more careful study we find that here again Jesus has given to us the potential of great encouragement as disciples of Jesus Christ. Listen to the words of the parable recorded in Luke 17:7-10. Jesus says:

*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 sit down at table”? Will he not rather say to him, “Prepare supper for me and gird yourself and serve me, till I eat and drink; and afterward you shall eat and drink”? Does he thank the servant because he did what was commanded? So you also, when you have done all that is commanded you, say, “We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty.”*

Once again in this parable Jesus uses common phenomena of his day to communicate his truth. Poverty was a common condition in Palestine in the first century. Other parables have referred to a widow who received tremendous injustice in the court system of her day, a poor man who had company unexpectedly arrive in the middle of the night and who opened his

cupboard only to find that there was no food there to give to his visitors. Or maybe you remember the parable of the poor woman who lost a single little coin and who would not stop looking until she had found it. Poverty was harsh in the first century just as poverty is harsh and hard in every century. But slavery was the worst.

Some may think that by using this as an example Jesus condoned slavery. This is clearly not the case. He used the slave as an illustration to communicate truth because all the people were familiar with slavery. Everyone knew that a slave worked hard. Everyone knew that a slave’s time was not his own. A slave had no jurisdiction over his schedule or his tasks. He didn’t even own his own body; his master dictated everything. By contrast, when a freed man would do a hard day’s labor he could come home and collapse on the couch and have his dinner. Not so the slave. No matter how diligently a slave labored all day long when he would come home he would have a whole new list of inside chores to do. Every task he

had led to another task until life became a miserable drudgery. Even when he performed exceptionally well, in all probability the average master would never even say “thank you.”

Now if you are one of those people who try to find the logic in things, you may find it fascinating that Jesus chose slavery to teach about service and the temptation to sin. Jesus knew that his followers, whether in the first century or the twenty-first century, would face temptations to sin in connection with their service as disciples of Jesus Christ. He knew that there would be some who would become weary in well doing, so fatigued that they wanted to quit, some who would become bitter because they did not receive the gratitude which they thought they had coming to them and some who would think that by doing their duty they had gained a special worthiness and deserved God’s accolades and God’s gracious response.

There’s a definite correlation between Jesus’ words that depressed his disciples in verse one and the parable that he tells in verses 7 through 10. Let me tell you that this is one relevant parable! It is as relevant as a Sunday School teacher thinking about quitting after nine months of service because there has not been a parent or a child who has said thank you. It is as current as the complaint of a missionary

***Loving others for Jesus’ sake is not a temporary duty. Ministry never finishes.***

who has diligently served in some distant mission field for the better part of a lifetime and doesn't feel appreciated. It is a parable about duty at a time when duty is not a popular concept. It is a parable that urges perseverance when many of us are more inclined to quit than to hang in there, a parable about serving when many of us are more inclined to be served than to serve. It is a parable telling us to do duty without sinning.

This parable presents to my understanding three tough truths about duty — truths that we may not be inclined to listen to but truths we need to hear. Tough truth number one in verses seven and eight is that duty never finishes. In the parable Jesus asks: "Will any one of you who has a servant plowing or keeping sheep say to him when he had come in from the field, "Come at once and sit down at table"?"

Jesus' listeners knew that there was no master that did that. Masters were more likely to say, "Hey you, prepare supper for me and afterwards if there's time you can eat and drink." The Greek word that is used here is the word *doulos* and although in many of our English Bibles it is translated as "servant", it may rightly be translated as "slave" over whom the master had complete control of every detail of life. We think of slavery as peculiar to our country before the Civil War sometimes forgetting that slavery has been around throughout history all over the world. There are many places in the world today where people are still in slavery.

Slaves don't work eight-hour days. They don't finish in the field or the fold and then come home and relax. When a slave finishes one task there is another and when that is finished there is yet another task. The master seeks to get all of the economic benefit that he can out of his slaves. They go immediately from chore to chore and it never, never, never ends. No days off. No vacations. Their duty is never finished.

The life of a slave seems so difficult and distant, but is it all that different to our lives today? We may not be slaves, but our duties are never finished. Take parenting for example. Parents begin their day by getting up early in the morning to prepare themselves and their children for the day. Then the parent goes off to work and has a difficult and demanding day, comes home weary, exhausted, ready to collapse, only to find hungry children who have wounds that need to be bandaged, homework that needs to be coached, lives that need to be loved. Finally at some late hour you are ready to collapse in bed with too many hours gone by and too few hours before the alarm goes off and the process begins all over again. Parenting is a

duty that never finishes.

The same is the case with ministry. When you become involved in serving God through serving others, it is a never-ending duty. Sunday School teaching is more than an hour on Sunday morning. There are children in the class whose lives become entwined with the teacher's life, who come from homes where there are problems, who have physical maladies or spiritual questions that were not in the teacher's manual. Or there's that person for whom you agree to pray, thinking that the problem will be short lived and you will utter a few brief prayers for a few brief days, only to find that the stressful time in that individual's life is chronic. What started out as a simple prayer request becomes complicated and protracted and you end praying for that person every single day for a year, maybe for a decade and maybe for a lifetime because the duty of intercession is never finished. Or you may have agreed to give financial support in some small amount to a friend going on a short term of missionary service. Then that friend senses the call of God to become a career missionary to the service of Jesus Christ and you discover that what started out as a comfortable financial commitment to his support, if duty is met, becomes an uncomfortable commitment to financially underwrite that person. Loving others for Jesus' sake is not a temporary duty. Ministry never finishes.

There was a physician named Grenfell who worked in the distant reaches of Labrador in north-eastern Canada and wrote of his experiences. He told the story of how he was called to a home where both mother and father were desperately ill. After an arduous journey he arrived there only to find that their malady was so far progressed that he tended not to their sickness but to their death. There was no responsible relative so the doctor had to make arrangements for the funeral and burials as well. Dr. Grenfell took care of the burial personally, knowing that he had gone far beyond his initial duty as a physician. Thinking he had finished his duty he wrote that he found himself "with five little mortals sitting on the grave mound. We thought that we had done all that could be expected of a doctor, but now we found the difference. It looked as if God expected more."

So it is with Christian duty! When we commit ourselves to Jesus Christ we become his *doulos*, his servant, his slave and he often expects more and more of us.

I said that this is a tough truth. It's tough not only because duty never finishes but also because we become tempted to think that God does not care. We become tempted to sin in the weariness of well doing

when duty piles upon duty until we think that we are going to collapse under the responsibilities that have been laid upon us. We think that God has abandoned us, that he is like the master in the parable who does not care. You can be sure that is the farthest from the truth! Remember that Jesus Christ himself, “though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant (*doulos*).” (Philippians 2:6-7).

The gospel writer tells us that he came “not to be served but to serve”, and throughout his service the pile of duties became greater and greater until one day the Roman soldiers nailed him to a cross. He must have wondered if God had not completely forgotten him, for he, too, was tempted to sin as we are tempted to sin. He must have been wondering if God no longer cared when he cried out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” But God cared. God cared deeply that day, just as God cares for us even when we feel forsaken.

It’s a tough truth that duty never finishes. But Jesus tells it like it is. He could have omitted it from his teaching and surely we could have omitted it from our study of parables, but it’s a truth that we need to hear from Jesus Christ. He wants us to know that around the next corner is not escape from responsibilities but more responsibilities. It is not always the case that if we make it up to the top of the mountain it will be downhill from there. Sometimes in life we discover that when we reach the peak it is not the top of the mountain but simply the top of a foothill and there are higher mountains and higher hills that are yet to come. The answer is not to try to escape duty, but rather to be like Jesus who chose to delight in the duty that never finishes.

But this is not the only tough truth that our Jesus shares with us in this parable, for he tells us not only that duty never finishes but adds in verse 9 that duty seeks no thanks. In the parable he asks a rhetorical question: “Does he (the master) thank the servant because he did what was commanded?” The clearly implied answer to this rhetorical question is “no!” The slave did not expect, nor in this case, receive thanks from his master.

It’s hard to serve without being thanked! And, to be sure, this parable is not condoning any lack of gratitude for the services of others. God himself is the one who said, “Well done, good and faithful servant!” But remember that the context here is about avoiding temptation to sin. I’ll tell you that one of the greatest

temptations to sin in the Christian life comes when we think we deserve thanks and we do not receive it. I know that from experience because I have so sinned. There have been occasions when I have done what I thought to be my very best for people, only to have no expression of gratitude. I will confess to you that there have been times when I have allowed that lack of expression of gratitude to be turned into bitterness and resentment in my heart. What started out as a grand opportunity to be God’s instrument in someone else’s life turned out to be a festering infection in my soul — the sin of resentment and bitterness — because no one said “thank you.”

I’m not alone in this. My guess is that nearly all of us have experienced the very same thing. There are parents who have poured themselves into their children’s lives, who have sacrificed astonishingly on behalf of their children, only to have their adult children be clearly ungrateful for all that their parents have done. Sometimes the parental love has tragically turned into hatred because of that ingratitude. There are wives who have sinned against their husbands and against God because they resented the fact that their

*...be like Jesus who chose to delight in the duty that never finishes.*

husbands were not appreciative of all that they have done. There are Christians who have quit serving God because people in the church never said “thank you” for teaching Sunday School or ushering or singing in the choir or giving money or providing for prayer or cooking or whatever the need may be. There are missionaries, some of whom I know, who left this country as zealous idealists to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ with a contagious enthusiasm only to return years later bitter and disillusioned because the people they went to serve didn’t seem to appreciate their sacrifices.

We all have a deep-seated need to be recognized and appreciated. I hope that we understand that need and say “thank you” to family and friends and teachers and ushers — anyone who serves you. I would encourage you when you pick up your children at the nursery that you say “thank you” to those that worked there and at the end of the school year you send a note to your children’s teachers in Sunday School and in public or private school and express appreciation for all that they have done for them.

It is good and right to give appreciation to others, but watch out when you are seeking it. The quest for appreciation on the part of a servant or a *doulos* of Jesus Christ is dangerous stuff indeed! If we expect thanks and do not receive it we often turn bitter. It’s a tough truth, one that Jesus wants us to know, that duty

seeks no thanks.

There's a third and final tough truth in the tenth verse: duty doesn't make worthiness. There is yet another temptation to sin in the doing of duty. It is the temptation to think that because we do our duty we are worthy of God. It is a tragically common phenomenon.

There are those who say, "God owes me. I have given him money, time and prayers. I have been faithful in diligently serving others in involvement in church and charity and now I have come to a crisis in my own life and I need his intervention. I demand it!" When they don't get what they want, God is considered to be a bad debtor who doesn't pay his bills.

There are those who say, "I deserve it. I have been involved for years in doing what God has called me to do. I have been a faithful servant for years and now I deserve special treatment." They may even expect preferential treatment in heaven.

Then there are those who, although they probably wouldn't say it, actually think, "I'm better. Look at all I have done through the years and look at what she hasn't done. Look at what he started to do and never finished. I'm better than them all."

How tragically mixed up such conclusions are, for when we think such things and when we say such words we have neglected the truth that we are all sinners. If we got what we really deserved we would be eternally lost. God has rescued us from sin and hell through Jesus Christ. He has redeemed us by his generosity and given us the stunning privilege of being his servants and living for him. Our lives should be expressions of gratitude for that which he did for us that we never deserved. What we do is our duty as those who have been redeemed – not a cause for pride and elevation in our sight or God's. Our service is simply the thank you that we offer to a God who has done everything for us.

Maybe it's best expressed in a parable of our own. A certain man was on a death boat headed to execution. But this man was so belligerent that the guards threw him overboard to drown mid-sea rather than deal with him on the journey. They did not anticipate that he would stay afloat long enough to be seen by someone on the bow of a luxury liner that came by not too long afterwards. When that lookout conveyed word to the captain of the ship, the captain decided in his goodness to stop and rescue the condemned man. He even offered the man a job aboard the ship for the rest of his life.

Three months later the rescued man had turned into a bitter and miserable person. His reasons were three:

1. There was a lot of work to do on the ship and he never seemed to get finished so that he could spend time up on the deck with the paying passengers and enjoy the comforts of the ship.
2. The captain seldom came around either to his quarters or to his workstation to thank him for the fine job that he was doing and to express gratitude for having him aboard the ship as a member of the crew.
3. He was disappointed that he was not given preferential treatment aboard the ship and fully recognized for his worthiness as a member of the ship's crew.

Now when word of these complaints reached the captain he found the rescued man and gave him some pointed advice. He said to him, "You don't even deserve to be here on this ship. Would you rather that you were thrown back overboard? Do you understand that you are the one who ought be grateful to work aboard the ship; you are the one who should be saying 'thank you'? When you have done all your work, you should say, 'I am an unworthy servant; I have only done what was my duty.'"

At the beginning I said that this was a parable of tough truths. But they are truths we sometimes need to hear. We dare not forget that we have been saved from sin by the grace of God. We dare not forget that we are highly privileged, honored to serve God. Let us not turn that honor into sin by stooping to wrong attitudes that turn us bitter. Rather let us thrill to the delight of doing our duty as disciples of Jesus Christ — even when that duty is never finished, even when we do not hear thanks. And most of all let us not think ourselves worthy when He is the one who is worthy of all praise and adoration.

Let us do our duty with delight . . . and without sinning!

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