

Luke 17:1-10 Preparing for the Final Banquet

Introduction

The focus of this message will be mainly on verses seven to ten, in the context of Luke's Gospel and his teaching on what it means to be a servant of our heavenly Master. His teaching in this context was seen of great significance in a culture where so many ordinary people were 'in service' or had been in service at some point in their lives to a human master. The passage addresses issues of Christian discipleship and invites the followers of Jesus to keep their hearts and minds on the calling He has entrusted to us. Our Lord knew that then and now the world contains so many distractions, good things, things of no particular significance or bad things that can take up our resources, our time and our abilities and the years can pass by so quickly and so little is sometimes accomplished. For most of us as Christians the challenge is to discern between the good and the best; between what may be permissible or desirable and what is God's will for our lives; It is often difficult when life takes some surprising turns to know how God would have us react to them. Some people struggle with success and it turns their heads away from honouring the Lord as they enjoy putting self on the throne; other Christians struggle with adversity –why did God allow this job to be lost, this career to be denied; my health to break down or relationships in my family to fracture? There are often no simple answers or explanations. Yet in line with the example of Jesus our calling is to keep our focus on our Lord and the way He honoured His Father in the way He conducted His life. Jesus spoke about those who are faithful in little things being honoured with greater opportunities for service. Although the opening verses of Luke 17 do not easily link with verses seven to ten, the broad points Jesus is making are clear enough to His first hearers and readers today.

1. The importance of deeply rooted faith (Luke 17:1-6)

(a) The necessity of a good example (Luke 17:1-2)¹ *Jesus said to his disciples: Things that cause people to sin are bound to come, but woe to that person through whom they come.* ² *It would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a millstone tied round his neck than for him to cause one of these little ones to sin.* Jesus' main focus here is on each disciple making the right choices for their own walk with God, but in the first two verses, following the appallingly bad choices of the rich man with respect to Lazarus in the previous chapter, there is a strong appeal to live uprightly in order to avoid hindering the spiritual progress of other followers of Jesus. This is incredibly serious leading other people astray, either by wrong teaching or misleading conduct. This is especially the case with respect to younger people. What does Jesus say here? Luke 17:2, the actual words of Jesus: *It would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a millstone tied round his neck than for him to cause one of these little ones to sin.* Here it could literally be a child or younger person or a person young in the faith who has been told to disbelieve the Bible or encouraged to disobey its teaching in their lifestyle. This is especially true for people who teach God's Word. James 3:1 states: *Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly.* This is how God views heterodox theological opinions about the eternal realities of heaven and hell or ethical matters about how we behave. If God has spoken then to say well the Bible says this but I think it is wrong is blasphemous. It is what God has spoken that we believe not what happens to be popular in the wider culture. Do we fear God most or the opinions of those around us at work or in our social circles or wherever? It can never be both. Paul reminds us of our calling in II Corinthians 5:9-10: *So we make it our goal to please Him, whether we are at*

home in the body or away from it. ¹⁰ For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due to him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.

This could be a costly business in twenty-first century Britain. There are a small but increasing numbers of Christians who have lost their employment not because they have done anything wrong, but because an employer or manager took exception to their Christian faith. Until the last few years there were hardly any cases like this at all, but the so-called 'Equality-Laws' passed by the previous Labour Government, privilege some people's rights above others and a number of recent court cases show the inevitable outcome of such discrimination. It affects Church life. The disgraceful scenes in some churches where people living lives dishonouring to God can be accepted as Ministers, Lay-leaders and Church members can only bring the cause of Christ into disrepute. It is though personal as well as collective and while pointing the finger at the sins of others is easy, it is essential that there is no cause for concern in our own Christian pathway. We are all sinners and but for the grace of God could commit every sin listed in the Bible. Therefore, we have to take a watchful eye to our own motives, words and conduct, so that we honour the Lord and encourage others to join us glorifying His name through right living.

(b) **The scandalous nature of grace** (Luke 17:3-4) ³So watch yourselves. If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him. ⁴ If he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times comes back to you and says, 'I repent,' forgive him. Some people think Christianity is for losers or weak people. Have they ever tried following Jesus? I don't think such people have even begun to grasp what it is about when they make such claims. There are two aspects here to our care for fellow believers, in addition to first watching over ourselves.

(i) **Intolerance of sinful conduct** If your brother sins, rebuke him... (Luke 17:3a). Paul in Galatians 6:1-5 expanded upon this principle. **Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted** ² Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfil the law of Christ. ³ If anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself. ⁴ Each one should test his own actions. Then he can take pride in himself, without comparing himself to somebody else, ⁵ for each one should carry his own load. Here there is a constant balance between concern for the actual sins of others and the possibility that we ourselves might need to be corrected by other believers sometimes. The easiest thing in the world in such situations is to look away and pretend we didn't notice anything. Not getting involved makes life so much easier, but it is not the way of Jesus. The way of love is to seek what is best for a brother or sister in Christ. Therefore, a constant watch to see that the Lord is honoured in our midst will glorify Him, but it must be with humility and a conscious awareness of our own shortcomings. We will never take pleasure in the mistakes of others; that should only bring genuine sorrow at their failures. (ii) **A generous spirit of forgiveness** if he repents, forgive him. ⁴ If he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times comes back to you and says, 'I repent,' forgive him (Luke 17:3b-4) . In the world how tragic is the quantity of bitterness and unforgiveness people carry around with them; what is worse how disturbing are the number of cases of Christians doing exactly the same. Jesus, in Mathew 6:14-15 declared: ¹⁴For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. ¹⁵But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins. This is incredibly tough love. Only the enabling power of the Holy Spirit will enable us to love people like this with a sincere heart.

(c) **The remarkable character of faith** (Luke 17:5-6) ⁵ The apostles said to the Lord, Increase our faith! ⁶ He replied, If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it will obey you. Jesus' teaching in Luke 17:3-4 seems as tough as it could possibly be, but He continues with a statement about the remarkable character of the faith we have in our Almighty God. The mustard seed, although not the smallest known to us today, was certainly the smallest seed known to the people of Jesus'

day. So Jesus is saying that the believer with the slightest faith in God can accomplish extraordinary things for God. This bush or tree was reputed to be as strongly rooted as any in the Holy Land at that time. Its roots were also incredibly deep and under normal circumstances uprooting such a bush or tree would be well nigh impossible for a person armed only with a spade or shovel. In effect Jesus is declaring that a person deeply rooted in Him will accomplish things in His service that they would have previously considered as well beyond their capabilities. Paul's prayer for the Ephesian Christians in Ephesians 3:20-21 reflects such a spirit: *Now to Him who is able to do **immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine**, according to His power that is at work within us,*²¹ *to Him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.* This is the mindset Jesus commends to His followers. The words of Luke 17:7-10 must be seen in this context.

2. **The example of Jesus in God-honouring service** (Luke 12:35-38)

Luke has already addressed this subject in Luke 12:35-38: *Be dressed ready for service and keep your lamps burning,*³⁶ *like men waiting for their master to return from a wedding banquet, so that when he comes and knocks they can immediately open the door for him.*³⁷ *It will be good for those servants whose master finds them watching when he comes. **I tell you the truth, he will dress himself to serve, will have them recline at the table and will come and wait on them.***³⁸ *It will be good for those servants whose master finds them ready, even if he comes in the second or third watch of the night.* In these verses Jesus has warned His disciples to be constantly watching out for His return, at the same time as going about their daily business. Paul had to rebuke some Thessalonian Christians who were sat about doing nothing waiting for Jesus' return (II Thessalonians 3:6-12). The Christian (who is healthy and full command of their faculties) will be busy making their life count for God at home, in the workplace as well as in church activities. Yet in extraordinary role reversal the One in authority chooses to serve those under his authority. They could not have expected it nor could they have assumed they were entitled to it, but the Lord over them models a way of life that is so contrary to worldly standards and values. In Luke 22:24-27 this teaching is confirmed with some words from Jesus at the Last Supper: *Also a dispute arose among them as to which of them was considered to be greatest.*²⁵ *Jesus said to them, The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who exercise authority over them call themselves Benefactors.*²⁶ *But you are not to be like that. Instead, the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves.*²⁷ *For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who is at the table? **But I am among you as one who serves.*** Luke does not choose to include the illustration of Jesus washing the disciples' feet, as John does (John 13:1-17), instead he cites just the teaching that followed that lesson into the nature of Christian service. Paul, in his great hymn of praise to Jesus, wrote about His earthly ministry in this light: *Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped,*⁷ *but made Himself nothing, **taking the very nature of a servant**, being made in human likeness.*⁸ *And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to death— even death on a cross!(Philippians 2:6-8).* This is shocking teaching to people living in a rigid hierarchical class system where everyone knows their place and sticks to it. The nearest we have to it today is the Hindu caste system, which though abolished years ago is still practised in many parts of India to this day. Following Jesus is not about asserting our rights it is about taking delight in exercising the right of service in His name. We do this because He first modelled this approach in His own ministry here on earth two thousand years ago.

3. **The nature of Christian service** (Luke 17:7-10)

(a) **The social context of this story** In our culture only the wealthy can have their resident maid, housekeeper, butler or gardener. However, in Jesus' day only the poorest of the underclass did not benefit from the service of other people. The very poorest people allowed their children to work as servants in order for them to eat and survive. The homes of the ordinary people of that day would have had only one hired helper in their homes. This individual may in turn work as a ploughman, a herdsman and the chief cook and bottle-washer! The Jewish Talmud, the lengthy volume giving guidance for observant Jews in the centuries around the time of Jesus, 'assumes, as a matter of course, that the ordinary man has at least one slave' [K.E. Bailey, *Through Peasant Eyes*, p.115]. In this story we must not assume the man in question is a wealthy landowner; he may be a man of modest means who rents a piece of land to grow crops for his family or to feed his animals. This is the world in which Jesus' hearers lived and the teaching given in association with the story assumes that His hearers could recognise this social environment as their own.

(b) **The telling of this story** (Luke 17:7-8)⁷ *Suppose one of you had a servant ploughing or looking after the sheep. Would he say to the servant when he comes in from the field, 'Come along now and sit down to eat'?⁸ Would he not rather say, 'Prepare my supper, get yourself ready and wait on me while I eat and drink; after that you may eat and drink'?* In our modern age when the average worker is assumed to work Monday to Friday 9am to 5pm it appears deeply unfair for this servant in the story to be working all hours with no apparent time off. There is no question that unlike the previous story in Luke 12:35-38 this story reflects life as it was lived in Jesus' day and no-one hearing Jesus speak would have raised any issues with it. The master has complete authority over his servant and can expect absolute obedience in return. The form of the wording in Luke 17:7 requires a negative answer. No-one listening to Jesus would expect to behave in the way described in that verse. The man ploughed the field because he was entrusted to carry out that task. He could not expect special honours simply because he had completed the tasks assigned to him. In the same way many members of the public in our country rightly question the appropriateness of giving honours in the Queen's Lists to politicians or civil servants or other people who have done no more than what they are often well-paid to do in the first place. Honours ought to be reserved for people who have rendered exceptional service in some form of human endeavour which is recognised by the wider community. We, like the servant in the story, need to exercise the self-discipline that goes with whatever vocation or calling we are engaged in at any particular time. A professional footballer ought not to expect praise because they are physically fit – it goes with the job. An office worker should not expect praise because they have some basic computer skills, it goes with the job. It is never inappropriate to encourage and express appreciation for one another, but that ought never to be the basis on which we approach our work. In the same way in our Christian discipleship our Master has given us instructions how to live our lives which we will follow until He comes again or calls us home first.

(c) **The significance of the story** (Luke 17:9-10)

⁹ *Would he thank the servant because he did what he was told to do?* ¹⁰ *So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.'* Jesus is teaching clearly in this story that the Master is in charge and His servants must yield full obedience to Him. They are not his equal. Therefore a master would not eat in that social context with his servant. However, although Jesus could make such a claim on His status He chose to eat with His disciples and with people others considered 'sinners' and beyond the reach of God's saving grace. In John 15:12-17 Jesus said some extraordinary words: *My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you.* ¹³ *Greater love has no-one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.* ¹⁴ *You are my friends if you do what I command.* ¹⁵ ***I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you.*** ¹⁶ *You did not choose Me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit— fruit that will last. Then the*

Father will give you whatever you ask in My name. ¹⁷ *This is My command: Love each other.* In Revelation 3:20 the Lord Jesus is pictured knocking at the door of a church that had excluded Him from its affairs. *Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with Me.* Jesus could have chosen in Revelation chapter three to give strong orders or commands to that church that had lost its way. Instead the gracious way He approached them provides a model for any of us in approaching people who have wronged us or wronged the Lord.

It is also commending humility in each of us about how we view our own service for the Lord. Jesus' teaching here was in line with a number of rabbis from generations prior to His time on earth. Rabbi Simon the Just, who lived around 300BC is reported to have said: 'be like slaves who serve the master not with a view to receiving a present: and let the fear of Heaven be upon you.' [Mishnah, Pirke Aboth, 1:3] Rabbi Johanan ben Zakkai (30-90AD and the leading rabbi of Judaism after the Fall of Jerusalem inAD70)), was also reported to have said: 'If you have accomplished much in the law, don't claim merit for yourself, for to this end you were created.' [Pirke Aboth 2:8]. There is a significant word Jesus uses in verse 9: ⁹ *Would he **thank** the servant because he did what he was told to do?* Literally the text reads: *Does he have any **grace** / favour for the servant...?* Does this recall any memories of the Christmas story as Luke recounts it? In Luke 1:26-30 there is the record of some words spoken by the Archangel Gabriel to Mary: ²⁶ *In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee,* ²⁷ *to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary.* ²⁸ *The angel went to her and said, Greetings, you who are **highly favoured!** The Lord is with you.* ²⁹ *Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be.* ³⁰ *But the angel said to her, Do not be afraid, Mary, **you have found favour with God.*** the basis of the choice of Mary was the grace of God. The right treatment of the servant in the story depends on his Master having grace to give him. The servant has earned no right to special favours he is simply dependent on the grace of his master. This story is about our justification by God and reminding us that salvation cannot be earned by good deeds. It was a direct challenge to the teaching of the Pharisees who taught the opposite to Jesus on this subject. In our preparation for the final heavenly banquet when we will stand before the Lord, trusting that He will welcome us into His eternal home, it is important to remember that:

The believer at best is God's servant / slave and is expected to obey and know his /her place as a servant. We will not make a point of seeking to tell God how to do His work, only to seek to do our best in that entrusted to us.

God's salvation is a gift of His grace, not a reward for the completion of our duties.

We work faithfully at the tasks assigned, recognising the sense of privilege we have to serve Him.

God is our Master, but our obedience is manifested in our response to His Son who modelled for us the perfect example as God's servant on earth. True believers will be rewarded in heaven because they served not for the reward, but to honour their Lord and Saviour [based on K.E. Bailey, *through Peasant Eyes*, p.126]. The apostle Paul expressed it this way in some very familiar words in Ephesians 2:8-10: *For it is by **grace** you have been saved, through faith— and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— ⁹ not by works, so that no-one can boast.* ¹⁰ *For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.* May He enable us live lives pleasing to Him, for Jesus' sake, Amen.