

Luke 17:1-10

Teaching for Unworthy Servants

Introduction

Do you sometimes feel as though you exist to serve your pets? They can be like little terrorists with lists of demands:

“Take me for a walk or I soil the floor!”

“Feed me or I will whine forever!”

“Do something about these fleas now, or I will make you crazy too!”

Once our dog came to me for a walk and whined until I got out of my chair and walked her. When we returned, she ran ahead of me and sat in my seat *just as I was about to sit in it*.

Pets are great, in their place. They should be there to serve their owners.

We are not God’s pets but there is an order in our relationship. People are put there for God. We were created for Him, to serve Him, not the other way around (Rev 4:11).

In this section of Luke, Jesus is teaching as He moves from His ministry in Galilee, to Jerusalem where He will eventually be crucified.

At first glance these teachings may seem unrelated but there is a relationship between them¹.

1. Jesus teaches about our influence of others
2. He teaches about rebuking and forgiving
3. He teaches about faith

All three of these teachings contrast with self-serving, which is what we saw in the Rich Man and Lazarus (Lk 16:19-31). They all lead to the idea of faithfully serving God, which is what the fourth section of the passage is about:

4. Jesus is teaching us what it means to serve Him instead of serving ourselves.

Here is the main idea: **Embrace your role as an unworthy servant of a worthy Savior**

¹ Bock, Darrell L. 2008. *Luke. Vol. 2 9:51-24:53*. Grand Rapids, Mich. Baker Academic.

Servants Disciple Others Responsibly (vv. 1-2)

Jesus has just finished telling the story of the rich man and Lazarus and He is clearly speaking about the Pharisees here, warning his disciples.

The Pharisees use their position as religious leaders to pursue material wealth (Lk 16:14). They place the teachings of rabbis (men) on the level with the words of Scripture (Mt 15:7-9). They have actively rejected Jesus, called him a friend of sinners (Lk 7:34), a blasphemer (Lk 5:21), and have told people that His mighty works are being done through the power of the devil (Lk 11:15). They are lovers of self, the rich man in the parable.

In Lk 12:1, Jesus told his followers “the leaven of the Pharisees” is dangerous because they served themselves!

However, Jesus’ teaching here is directed to the disciples (v. 1). In verse 3 he tells them, “Pay attention to yourselves!”

As God’s servants, they have influence over others. In the book of Acts, the disciples become responsible for helping to bring everyone into spiritual maturity.

We likewise have influence with people, whether we are a leaders or not, whether you are in middle school or high school, or you are a grandparent.

QUESTION: Do you see yourself as a person of influence in the lives of others? Who are those you influence most?

The word here in Greek for “temptations to sin” is *skandala* (where we get our word scandal from)², which means a bait or a lure to trap animals. Sometimes we see it translated as “stumbling stone” or “obstacle”

“I appeal to you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught; avoid them.”

(Romans 16:17 ESV)

Jesus explains, that people will be tempted. Being tempted is a part of our existence, but it matters how those temptations come. Your actions can entice someone else to sin.

The “Little ones” are those around you who don’t know what you know. They haven’t had the exposure you have to God’s Word. Perhaps they are willing to listen, but they are not yet mature in the Lord.

² Bauer, W., F. W. Danker, W. F. Arndt, and F. W. Gingrich, eds. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. 3d, Accordance electronic ed., version 2.8. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000. p. 926.

God will hold people responsible. The punishment will be severe for those who tempt little ones to sin. In other words, if you had the choice to rewind and choose your punishment, you would rather have the several hundred pound millstone! This is a strong warning to His disciples, not only about the Pharisees about also about their own lives.

You bear responsibility for others! You are discipling other people around you with your thoughts and words. You are influencing them towards something.

At Work

Think about your relationship to your coworkers. If you are a coworker who raises the bar and goes the extra mile, the whole team is encouraged to do a better job. You just served everyone!

Or, negatively, let's say you are a lazy coworker. You can cause your fellow workers to stumble by "working" like there's no one looking. Cut corners, scroll on social media, do just enough not to get caught... They see you and they are all brought down

You only served yourself! You just brought your whole team down because you didn't want to work

On Social Media

If you are on social media, think about how what you do there influences others. You can use it to encourage people, and help them grow towards Jesus, or you can:

1. Make other people jealous by posting pictures of your house, vacation. If you have something that others don't have, you can provoke them to coveting
2. Make others notice your body, whether it is workout pictures or a new outfit. Some will struggle with lust, others with envy.

Your use of social media can be a stumbling block.

In Parenting

The same thing is true for how you raise your children.

Dads, it matters what you do. If your kids see you prioritizing time in Scripture, loving them and your wife sacrificially, humbling yourself and asking forgiveness when you blow it

You will be setting the bar for them. You are teaching them what a husband and a dad look like.

Or, sadly, you can live hypocritically. You can put on a good show at church, then go home and criticize and berate your wife, look at other women lustfully and be sinfully angry at your kids when they do something wrong.

If you do, the enemy will use your life as an example to follow.

Or Satan may suggest that they ignore the faith because they see no evidence of it in your life.

This is what is meant by being a stumbling block.

QUESTION: Are there places in your life that you might be a stumbling block to others? What have you done to correct that, by God's grace?

If this is you, repent!

Humble yourself before God. Ask Him to do whatever it takes to change your heart. Tell people you were wrong. Ask for accountability.

Receive grace, don't wallow in guilt and self-condemnation. If you have received grace, act like it! Self-condemnation is something we do to add to the sufferings of Jesus—we don't need to because His work was complete!

Servants Confront and Forgive Others (vv. 3-4)

Rebuke

When we are Jesus' servants, we act on His behalf. We demonstrate to others what our master and His kingdom are all about.

In the Gospel of Luke, what does Jesus do when He sees His disciples sinning? He says something about it. He rebukes them when they don't see their sin (Lk 9:55). Rebuking people is uncomfortable for some of us to wade in. We recuse ourselves, saying, "it's not my business." However, verses 1-2 showed us we are more connected than we think, our lives influence others, and we have a responsibility to use our influence well. So we wade in, in a spirit of gentleness (Gal 6:1). For the other person's good, we rebuke (Pr 27:6).

Forgive

Maybe this part of the passage stirred up some questions for you.

Perhaps as you read the passage you think, "If he repents and sins against you seven times in the day"—he is not repenting well! This is true. The nature of repentance means that there is heart change and life change. Sometimes that takes time—think about habitual sins that you have faced.

Are we supposed to trust someone who keeps sinning against us? There is a difference between trusting and forgiving. Jesus tells us to be wise as snakes and innocent as doves (Mt 10:16). He doesn't call us to naivete if someone continues in a track record of sin against us. We can forgive and wisely withhold trust. Broken trust takes time to heal. It takes time and faithfulness to regain it.

If you are being abused, this passage might make you question, "Do I stay in a relationship in which I am being abused?" Jesus is not commanding that here! We can remove ourselves from danger and get help, without sin.

“The prudent sees danger and hides himself, but the simple go on and suffer for it.”

(Proverbs 22:3 ESV)³

QUESTION: Are there other questions about forgiveness that this passage sparks for you? Discuss with your group.

Having examined those lines of thought, let's look at what the text does say. This passage is about what our responsibility is when we are sinned against. You are responsible to convey the message “as far as I'm concerned, you are forgiven.” God uses means. He uses things and people and situations to accomplish His work and His will.⁴ One of those means is His servants. God could say these words Himself, but He purposes to use your mouth. If he uses your mouth, it has to come from *you* as well as from Him. After all, You can't grit your teeth and forgive someone.

This is a lot to ask! But could it be that when people sin against us, we are being given an opportunity to grow in Christlikeness? Might it be that God in His sovereignty wants us to grow in our understanding of the grace we have been given? This forces us to run to the cross when we are all out of grace.

This is also interesting because Jesus just told us we need to watch ourselves. He wasn't only talking about using our influence well. He was reminding us that we can be caught in the trap of bitterness. We can trip over the stumbling block of our own offense at what someone has done to us.

How often do you hang on to things that people have done against you and remember it against them, with the way you talk about them or the way that you think of them or the way you act about them?

Yet, what have we done to God? Have we not sinned against Him seven times in a day, often for the same thing?

And what has He done in response?

He has patiently and lovingly rebuked us.

He has spoken forgiveness to our hearts.

And even when we have trouble believing we are forgiven, he assures us of it.

QUESTION: How can you tell when you are having trouble forgiving someone? What are some common symptoms of bitterness for you?

³ Also see Lk 4:29-30 and Acts 9:25.

⁴ Crabtree, Sam. 2011. *Practicing Affirmation : God-Centered Praise of Those Who Are Not God*. Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway. pp. 83-84

So, He asks us to be His servants, to rebuke and forgive others in His Name. The apostles feel the weight of this too. Look what they say next...

Servants Exercise Faith (vv. 5-6)

It requires faith to forgive people. You have to believe and put in practice some truths about God:

That God is Just: To trust that if they have done wrong, God will settle all accounts.

That God can Heal and Restore: I still need healing, even though I am not demanding that they restore the brokenness, or satisfy the debt.

We do not want to become like the unmerciful servant in Matthew 18:28, saying “Pay what you owe.”

The apostles are saying, “It will take more than what we have got in order to forgive people!” They ask, “Make our faith bigger!” They have heard Jesus say to them, “You of little faith,”⁵ and they think the size of their faith is the problem. Jesus explains to them that they need to make use of what they have. The more important thing is not the greatness of your faith but the greatness of your God.

He uses a surprising image. A black mulberry tree, found in Palestine, has a big root system⁶. It is so vast that a mulberry tree can live for up to 600 years (more than twice the amount of time the U.S. has been a country!). You couldn’t yank that thing out of the ground if you tried—you’d need a Bobcat to budge it! Jesus is telling us that, rightly used, your faith has the power of a Bobcat.

Not only that but a mulberry tree wouldn’t want to move into the sea! If the tree could talk back it would say “No, I’m good. Why would I want to go there?” But God’s power, when exercised through our faith in Him can compel even something that doesn’t want to be planted somewhere to *go and be planted there*.

How do I know that is true? Because God planted my heart in Him. I didn’t want to go. I was rooted and established in sin. I planned to keep growing in sinful selfishness, and bearing the fruit of sin that leads to death. But Jesus came to my heart and said “GO” and I went. This is why we believe in God’s sovereignty in salvation—It’s Jesus who saves sinners! It’s His power that uproots us and compels us to come and be planted in the sea of His great love.

⁵ Luke 12:24

⁶ Morris, Leon, *Luke: An Introduction and Commentary*. Vol. 3 of Tyndale New Testament Commentaries. IVP/Accordance electronic ed. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1988. p. 273.

Jesus tells the apostles, the power you need is not the size of your faith. The power is found in the God you place that faith in.

In Luke 1:26-38, The angel Gabriel shares the good news with Mary that she will be the mother of Jesus, the Son of God. This is an impossible situation—Mary knows the facts about how babies are made. Yet the angel explains that Mary will be overshadowed by the Holy Spirit, that this will be God’s work. Gabriel assures Mary that “Nothing will be impossible with God.” Mary’s response is one of faith, “I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.” Can you see the connection? She understands servants must exercise faith.

God commands us to do things we cannot do on our own, but as we trust Him and walk forward in faith, using our influence for Him, rebuking and forgiving others, amazing things happen!

This is what happened through these apostles and disciples. Consider the growth, as reported by sociologist Rodney Stark⁷:

- 7,500 Christians by the end of the first century (0.02% of sixty million people);
- 40,000 Christians by 150 AD (0.07%)
- 200,000 by 200 AD (0.35%)
- 2 million by 250 AD (2%)
- 6 million by 300 AD (4%)
- 30+ million by 350 AD (over 50%)⁸

Perhaps you have doubts as you look at circumstances in your life.

Maybe you have a child you struggle to parent. You confess, “I don’t know how I’m going to raise this child for you, Lord. It’s too hard. They are dug in like that mulberry tree.”

The Lord tells us, “Place that little bit of struggling faith in me. You can do all things through Him who strengthens you.” Even if your child continues in sin, you can parent them well, to the glory of God.

Maybe you look at yourself and you say “I don’t know to be an evangelist. I don’t know how to bring people to Jesus. I’m not particularly outgoing or charismatic.”

Yet, Jesus doesn’t want for your faith to be in you. He says “Follow me and I will make you fishers of men.” (Mt 4:19) He wants your faith to be in Him.

He wants us to serve Him in faith and confidence.

QUESTION: What is an aspect of your life that challenges your faith? What Scriptures could you bring to bear on that part of your life?

⁷ Interestingly, Stark was not a Christian for most of his academic career. However, after weighing the evidence of church history, he moved from being an agnostic to a self-proclaimed “independent Christian.”

⁸ Stark, Rodney. 1996. *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries*. New York: Harperone. pp. 7-12.

Servants Know They Are Servants (vv. 7-10)

At my first job working at Publix, not once did the store manager invite me to sit behind his desk and manage the store.

Instead he found me if things were getting slow and told me to go get carts from the parking lot, or make sure each register had enough bags, or sweep the floor, or break down boxes—anything to earn my \$3.65/hr. I was made to understand my station.

Just like my dog needs to understand that she is the dog and I am the master, the servants in Jesus' illustration understand they are servants. They don't need to be coddled. They don't need an extra tip or an extra "thank you" for doing their job. They simply need to embrace their role as servants.

The problem is that you and I forget our station in the kingdom. We think that God should serve our agenda. We get angry, upset, depressed when God doesn't remove all opposition and suffering and difficulty from our lives. This happens when He doesn't make our work easy, when He doesn't help us on our timetable, and when He doesn't fulfill all of our wants.

Jesus is saying through this illustration, "don't be like the rich man and be focused on yourself: be humble. Remember your station."

You are only an unworthy servant. Does it bother you to have Jesus say you are unworthy? Some translations even call them "worthless" servants.⁹ Notice: these servants did everything, all that they were commanded ... why aren't they worthy servants?¹⁰

QUESTION: Does Jesus' teaching about being an unworthy servant bother you? Why or why not?

You don't get to be a servant in the kingdom of God by being a first-round draft pick. You'd never make it. Even angels in all their power and perfection only call themselves "servants." (Rev 19:10) In the Garden of Eden, even though Adam and Eve were created by God in perfection, they decided they did not want to serve Him.

In *The Lord of the Rings*, Gollum agrees to be Frodo's servant because he has the ring of power, but in His mind, he wants to be the Master. This is just like every

⁹ HCSB: "good-for-nothing"; NRSV: "worthless"; KJV: "unprofitable." This is likely a reference to the New Testament's other use of this word in Matthew 25:30.

¹⁰ I am indebted to Dr. Bryan Chappell for this insight, in this interview: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R9PNivPEkT8>

human being on the planet; we want to be the Master. This put us in opposition to God, and it would have earned us death. None of us were worthy to serve Him.

So God sent His Son to be the perfect servant:

“Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied; by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities.”
(Isaiah 53:11 ESV)

The “anguish of His soul” refers to Jesus, being punished on our behalf. For all the ways in which we rose up against God, Jesus lowered Himself and took our punishment and place. Because He perfectly fulfilled our punishment, He was raised on the third day. He made us righteous, just as Isaiah says.

Perhaps you realize today that you have spent your whole life trying to get God to serve your agenda, while you have ignored His.

Or as you read this passage, you feel like that servant working in the field, and you get called in to serve the master dinner. You think, “I have been working hard. Why do I have to do more?” But when Jesus asks more of you, you don’t get a pass. You are still a servant.

So, humble yourself today. Stop trying to fight Him for His rightful place, turn from your sin and thank Him for what He did on the cross for you. Let His agenda for your life become your agenda for your life.

We find our worth not in our works, but in His work and His worth. We are called servants of God by grace, not by works. The apostle Paul persecuted Christians, even having some put to death. So when Paul starts some of his letters with “Paul, a servant” he surely does it with a grateful smile, remembering Psalm 84:

“For a day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere. I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of wickedness.”
(Psalm 84:10 ESV)

QUESTION: What about being Jesus’ servant brings you the most joy?

Yes, we are unworthy servants, church. But we serve a worthy Master and Savior.

Can you see Jesus’ work all through our passage?

Jesus took the milstone we deserved, and He will always influence us in His righteousness.

Jesus is the reason we can forgive, because He first forgave us.

Jesus is the one we place our mustard-seed faith in, and His power has saved us.

Jesus is the perfect, worthy servant who covers all of our unworthiness.

Don't forget your station as a servant and try to get God to serve your agenda.

Rejoice in the fact that you get to serve our Master, Jesus.

You have the privilege of being His servant because He first served you.