THE PARABLES

The Obedient Servant

Luke 17:7-10

The Structure of the Parable

First lines (v. 7)

"Will any of you who has a servant	Servant
ploughing or keeping sheep	Fulfilling duties
say to him, when he has come in from the field,	Duties fulfilled
'Come at once and recline at table (to eat)***' ?"***	A reward?

Second lines (v. 8)

"Will he not rather say to him,	
'Prepare supper for me and dress properly	Serve the master
and serve me while I eat and drink	Then yourself
and afterwards you will eat and drink'?"	

Third lines (v. 10)

"Does he thank the servant because he did	Servants
what was commanded?	Duties fulfilled
So you also, when you have done all that	A reward?
you were commanded, say, 'We are unworthy servants.	
We have only done our duty'."	

The Interpretation

First lines v. 7

The traditional role of servants/slaves is well defined. It is much the same now as it was 20 centuries ago. In one job I had in the Arab World I was given a written contract which I was asked to read and then sign at the start of my employment. The last clause of the contract said that my employer had the right to change anything in the contract without consulting me and I would be obliged to abide by it. I knew nothing had really changed! I was little more than a servant being given his duties!

So for a master to serve his own servants is unheard of! It doesn't happen except in the case of the Lord Jesus. Compare the foot washing scene in John 13:3-5. Paul described this beautifully in Phil. 2:6-7. Remember, there were no laws about a 40-hour week and no time and a half over-time!

As you read this parable in the 21st century it seems to be grossly unfair! But the Lord Jesus is building His story on widely accepted views of masters with authority and servants/slaves working in obedience to that authority. In the Middle East then and even now in many situations the servant gains a sense of worth and meaning in his role especially if he is serving a great and powerful man. The servant offers loyalty, obedience and a great deal of hard work. In return he gets meaning, worth, security and a relationship of mutual trust with his master. The master will look after him and his family. Middle Easterners assume both parties are happy with their expected roles.

So in the first lines (v. 7) the answer of the audience is, "No"! They couldn't possibly imagine any employer/master treating his servant like this – giving him a very special honour after having just done an ordinary day's work! The master isn't indebted to his servant in any way for the servant has merely done what he was supposed to do.

The meal eaten is the one usually eaten at about 3.00 pm – the hottest part of the day when it is wise to get out of the sun. So the master is not harsh and unfeeling towards his servant. The question is: Does the master give a very special privilege to a servant who has merely done his daily job? The answer of everyone in the audience is, "No"!

Second lines v. 8

The master is the master and is not in any way equal with his servant. Remember that the Greek word used here is *"doulos"* which can equally be translated "slave". By implication there is no equality of status between God and ourselves!

But in the New Testament the Lord Jesus demonstrates extraordinary grace! Look at the following examples:

- He frequently eats with His disciples.
- He eats with sinners.
- His disciples are called friends not 'servants'/slaves (Jn. 15:15)
- He stands at the door knocking eager to enter and eat with anyone who opens the door. Rev. 3:20

In spite of this there is no easy equality between us and the Lord Jesus.

Third lines v. 9-10

The themes found in the first set of lines are repeated here in the third set. So the question is asked: Does the servant/slave expect to be thanked for his work or to receive some special merit? As disciples, we are called to identify with this servant/slave in the parable. Do we expect to be thanked? The question in v. 9 is literally, *"Does he have any grace/favour for the servant?"*

The Greek word *'charis'* is used and it is always translated 'grace' in the New Testament. In Luke 'grace' has to do with credit (Lk. 6:32-34) and favour (Lk. 1:30). In Lk 1:3 Mary is told, "***You have found 'charis'*** (favour) ***with God"***. Next she is told, ***" … you will conceive in your womb and bear a son …."***

In the Old Testament there is a phrase used very often, ***"if I have found favour … then … "*** (Gen 18:3; Num. 11:15; 1 Sam. 20:29; Esther 5:8). In each of these cases the favour is **a gift** – it isn't something earned. In this parable we have a servant just doing his ordinary work. Does this mean the master is indebted to his servant? The implication is, "No"! The servant has just done his job. He has done what he was told to do. The master doesn't have any special merit/favour *'charis'* for his servant.

Then comes the application to the audience listening to the Lord Jesus. What does the phrase, ***"We are unworthy servants"*** mean? 'Unworthy' is a translation of the Greek word *'achreios'*. In Greek, as in English, putting 'a' in front of a word reverses its meaning – e.g. 'moral' and 'amoral'. In Greek the word *'chreios'* means 'need'. Literally what the servant says is, *"We are servants and we have no need".*

In the modern dialect of the Palestinian and Lebanese village people, if a villager does a small job for someone – perhaps in his house – the following conversation is likely to take place.

House owner: "fi haja?" (is there any need?) Meaning, "do I owe you anything?"

The workman: "ma fi haja" (there is no need) meaning, "you owe me nothing."

So the parable instructs us disciples to say, *"We are servants/slaves to whom nothing is owed. We have only done our duty."* The implication is clear. A disciple is not an 'employee' who works and expects payment for that work. He is a slave for whom the master accepts total responsibility. Thus he enjoys total security if God is his master. He works out of a sense of duty and loyalty not in the hope of gaining any reward. After he has fulfilled all the commands of his master he says, *"Nothing is owing to me. I have only done my duty."*

The theological applications of this parable are indeed radical! Clearly we are talking about salvation and good works. It is a profoundly important parable to share with Muslim friends. It seems that they and many nominal Christians as well as those following Rabbinic Doctrine have a 'tit-for-tat' concept of their relationship with God and somehow believe that God owes us for all the good deeds we do. This results in the concept of 'balances'.

But for the Lord Jesus salvation is a free gift! The whole concept of 'tit-for-tat' challenges us to look into the motivation for our service and our discipleship. Are we hoping for certain 'results'? Are we serving in order to gain? Having served with some success, do we have some further claims on God? The parable says, "No" to all such claims! We must avoid having a bookkeeping mentality in which we can run up credit with God by our works. The Lord Jesus says it can't be done! God's grace can't be earned! The parable very clearly answers the question, "Does God have grace/merit for the servant/slave because he did what he was commanded to do?" The answer is: "No"!

Finally there is the question in the parable of who is the master? The answer is clearly God. The Lord Jesus is always addressed as 'Master' and the disciple is always the servant. It was only after Easter that the disciples began to realise the deity of their Master.

So the conclusion we should draw from the parable is: "We are disciples/servants/slaves whose finest efforts earn us no merit with our Master. As servants/slaves we do our duty and we expect no pay."

Conclusions

1. The believer is a servant/slave. He is expected to obey and to know his place as a servant.
2. Salvation/grace is a gift. It is not a reward for services rendered.
3. As servants of God we work hard to fulfil a duty. We don't develop claims on God nor do we serve to receive rewards.
4. God is the Master of the believer. At the same time, a believer's task as a servant is to be obedient to the Lord Jesus and to the leading of the Holy Spirit who we should serve with complete loyalty and diligence.

So we are to work hard knowing that nothing is owed to us. We are merely doing our duty. We are not earning merit because all God's gifts come unmerited and unearned.