

SERMONS

FROM RIVERSIDE

GOD OWES NO ONE

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GOD OWES NO ONE

"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.'"
Luke 17:10

"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.'" Now there is a verse to rattle our sensibilities! In fact, the whole passage has a way of getting under our skin.

If a man has a servant, Jesus asks, does he coddle him? Even after he has worked all day ploughing and tending sheep, the servant is not allowed to have his supper until the master is served! To twist the knife a little more, Jesus goes on to ask, "Does he thank the servant because he did what was commanded?" (Lk. 17:9) Then with his "so you also" Jesus leaves the farm house and ties the point to His disciples and to us: "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.'"

That doesn't sound like Jesus, does it? Yet we cannot question the text. Its credentials are beyond dispute. The words are Jesus' words alright. They were part of St. Luke's gospel from the beginning.

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What is it that bothers us about this seldom treated teaching of Jesus? Well, for one thing, the arrogance of the master is an irritant. The tyrant appears almost heartless. Some nerve! A servant works the whole day long and the owner demands still more. He comes over like an early Palestinian version of Scrooge. Why, a character like that would opt for the 14 hour day and vote for child labor!

Another irritant centers in the use of two words that rile the modern temper. Those words are "command"

and "duty." Such language strike us as cold! Before we can handle it we must have it defrosted. No one commands us anymore. And as for duties, well, we're not there anymore either. We do what we are comfortable doing. Nowadays we have feelings not obligations!

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Lest we be angry for the wrong reason here, I should like to clarify one critically important point. Our Lord in this passage is not - I repeat - is not talking about God, He is talking about us. The key figure is not the master but the servant. Jesus merely used a common happening in the agrarian life of His day to make His point. And what is that point? The point is not to show us in what spirit God deals with His servants, but to teach rather in what spirit we should serve God!

And what is the proper spirit for a servant of God? Two characteristics are praised. First, our attitude should be one of constant availability - from the field to the kitchen, and on beyond that if need be. A woman's work, we say, is never done. Neither is that of a servant of God. As the hymn has it:

*"No time for rest
till glows the western sky."*

A Professor may have her sabbaticals and her retirement rest, a soldier may have his occasional week-end pass and eventually be mustered out, but once Christ conscripts us we are His for the duration - seven days a week for life. Whether our Corporation moves us around from Detroit to Los Angeles or New York is beside the point. The story goes on and the claim persists. There is no such thing as a sometime, part-time Christian. We are never off-duty, but always "on call" and "under command." The attitude of constant availability.

The other aspect of the servant's attitude that Jesus lifts up is this: He should serve God with the

understanding that service is its own reward. The service to which we are called does not inflate when praised or collapse when criticized or blamed. Jesus' words are almost harsh: "Does he thank the servant because he did the things that were commanded him?"

In our younger years in the faith we need the encouragement of friends. I am grateful for those who applauded in one way or another when I memorized a few chapters of Scripture as a youth. Those "well dones" made me want to dig in and do better. But it is a dangerous business to condition our service to God on such rewards. God wants us to serve Him with a devotion that does not inflate when praised or collapse when criticized. The spirit is that of giving without counting the cost, of fighting without heeding the wounds. There is no quid pro quo -- if you serve me thusly I will do this for you. Nothing like that! The kind of service that God seeks from us never asks, "What's in it for me?" "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.'" This is a hard saying. Who of us can hear it?

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The question logically comes up: What is the motive for this kind of service? The answer to that is apparent in what Jesus said. It can be stated in one word, one four-letter word, a word that we seldom see anymore either within the church or without. That word, believe it or not, is duty! You say, "Come again, preacher, what was that word?" I answer, "duty", d-u-t-y, "duty."

But hasn't Jesus freed us up from that? So, we debunk duty. It is moralistic. It is legalistic. It is sub-Christian or pre-Christian or whatever. What is this man doing to us today, giving us a sermon that might better be preached in a Prep School somewhere in New England? Duty! Is there not a more subtle theology to be communicated on Reformation Sunday than this? For freedom Christ has set us free, and now we talk of duty!

Thus, we are free of duty. If you will pardon a horrible pun, we are as duty-free as a Care Package! We have no duties, only feelings. No duty to our parents. No duty to a marriage partner. No duty to an employer. No duty to the state. And, when all is said and done, no duty to God. Isn't God fortunate that we are worshipping Him today! We have no obligations. All is optional. And the mark of the modern sophisticate is to keep all of his options open.

Instead of a sense of duty we trust our moods and feelings. We worship if we feel like it. We vote if we feel like it. We write home to our aging parents if we feel like it. We study to improve our minds if --- if we feel like it.

What if in the early dawn of that first Good Friday the cry had gone up, "My God, my God, I don't feel like dying today!" "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.'"

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It remains, finally, to ask on what this sense of duty rests. The answer in one strong, almost indefinable word is "Grace." That's what the Christian life is all about. Grace and duty are not antithetical. Duty derives from grace. Two statements summarize the matter well. God owes us nothing. We owe Him all. Is that too Protestant for you? God owes us nothing. We owe Him all.

St. Paul who was the finest expositor of grace either within or beyond the Bible understood what duty was. Listen to him: "The love of Christ constrains me" -- that is, forces, compels, drives, controls me. (II Cor. 5:14) "I am debtor both to the Greeks, and to the Barbarians." (Rom. 1:14) He owed something. "I am a servant of Jesus Christ" -- which means slave. (Rom. 1:1) "Necessity is laid upon me. (Not simply options which depend on feelings.) Woe is me if I preach not the gospel." (I Cor. 9:16) God owes us nothing.

Today is Reformation Sunday, and the last thing I want to do is to open up old scar tissue. However, it is a matter of historical record that the church got into some bad notions about grace way back in the second century. A heresy formed that men like Luther and Calvin fought against, and we can thank God that they did.

The idea was developed that man by his achievements could get God into a position where He owed them something. For example, in The Didache, a little book of teaching used in the early church, this counsel was given: "If thou art able to bear the whole yoke of the Lord, thou shalt be perfect; but if thou art not able, do that which thou art able." If you can handle all that God requires, fine. If you can't, do the best you can.

The Epistle of Hermas taught that a man could do more than God commands and that when he did he would receive a proportionate reward. This is where the concept of a treasury of merit was born. Those who over-did it achieved a surplus that could be applied to those who under-did it.

Even people of the caliber of Tertullian and Origen held to this line of thought. They made a distinction between the advice of the gospel and the requirements of the gospel. The advice of the gospel was for those who would live the holiest possible life, while the requirements were binding on all. That is to say, the whole New Testament wasn't equally binding on everybody. Some had to do more, but others could do less. The result of all of this was, in the parlance of golf, that some people could break par and shoot a few eagles now and then and thus get God indebted to them.

Such thinking mocks grace and makes us intent on noting scores and keeping books. I know people even in these modern times who play such games with God. In one way or another they cling to their moral record as the basis of their ties with God. How often Christian people in an hour of heavy trial will say, "Why

one another and to give one another strokes.

But let us not become too dependent on these. To sustain your stamina I suggest that you cheat a little and turn to the back of the book to see how the whole thing ends. I did that the other day and landed in Revelation 19. "Then I heard," said John, "what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the sound of many waters and like the sound of mighty thunderpeals, crying, 'Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his Bride has made herself ready; it was granted her to be clothed with fine linen, bright and pure' -- for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints." (Rev. 19:6-8)

What we do is never lost. Our works will be there at the end, adorning the church on its wedding day. "The marriage of the Lamb has come, and his Bride has made herself ready; it was granted her to be clothed with fine linen, bright and pure -- for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints." -- some of them from Riverside!

CLOSING PRAYER

*Forgive us Lord our score-keeping,
our feelings easily hurt,
our compulsive hunger for praise
and recognition.*

*Forgive us for ever thinking that any work we
might call good could lay a claim on Thee.*

*Humble us before Thy grace
and nerve our wills to spend and
be spent for Thee - which is our
reasonable service.*

*Through Jesus Christ our Lord
Amen*



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