How do you feel after you have done something good for another person?
What expectations do we usually have when we help someone?[1]

Read: Luke 17:5-10

Where are we in Luke

The verse after today's reading reminds us that Jesus is still on his journey to Jerusalem. 'On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee' (Luke 17:11 NIV). It would appear that Jesus has not travelled very far! Note what Ian Paul says: 'The travelogue is about the meaning of discipleship, and he [Luke] appears to have organised his material with this concern in mind, and is clearly not setting things out in chronological or geographical order.'[2] This needn't be a challenge to our faith – Luke has said in Luke 1:1-4, that he has 'carefully investigated', and written an 'orderly account.'[3] So while Luke's account is broadly chronological he does organise some material according to theme or geography.
We see again the theme of discipleship as these teachings are directed to the disciples.

Context and Introduction

One of the challenges of the lectionary is that it often leaves verses out. Today's reading seems like it has been plucked out of context.

Read Luke 17:1-4

We need to go back to 17:1 to see that these teachings are addressed to the disciples.

17:3-4 gives us the immediate context of our passage today, Jesus has told his disciples that they must forgive their brother or sister seven times a day, a very difficult thing to do. In response to this, the disciples ask for more faith.This is a very different context to the similar saying in Matthew, which may be the more familiar passage to many of you (Read Matthew 17:19-21). That is the context and reading I am more familiar with, and I have often heard it preached that we can do amazing things for God, signs and wonders, if only we had faith. That is not our reading today nor the context.

[1] Some questions in this study taken from *Adult Questions for LESSONmaker* (Lk 17:1–10). (Logos, 2024).
[2] https://www.psephizo.com/biblical-studies/is-mary-magdalene-a-tower-that-we-have-sidelined/ . And https://www.psephizo.com/biblical-studies/does-jesus-treat-us-as-good-for-nothing-slaves-in-luke-17/
[3] John Nolland, *Luke 1:1–9:20*, WBC 35A (Dallas, Texas: Word Books, 1989), 10.

Faith of a Mustard Seed

In response to the difficult teaching of verse 3-4, the disciples ask for more faith. The verb used here ('Increase our faith' in the NIV), προστίθημι (*prostithēmi*) is the same word used in Acts 2:47 (And the Lord *added* to their number daily). That is, the disciples were asking for a greater amount of faither.

The type of faith being asked for in this context is not the faith to do great wonders (as in Matthew 17:19-21), but the type of faith that is able to respond to Jesus' hard teaching.

Background

Mustard seed - There are seeds known in the universe of human discovery to be smaller than a mustard seed, but it was the smallest of all the common seeds—of all the seeds used in agriculture in that land at that time[4]

mulberry tree - σῡκᾰ́μινος (*sykaminos*). This is most likely the fig-mulberry, which was traditionally deep-rooted.[5] The root capacity of the mulberry fig tree, (שִׁקְמָה) was considered to be particularly strong [Jerusalem Talmud Berakot 9.14A.23]. It was assumed that the tree could stand in the ground for 600 years [Genesis Rabbah 12 (9B)].[6]

Rather than grant the disciples more faith, Jesus tells them what a little faith can achieve. 'Faith's presence is more important than its quantity. Jesus is essentially saying that God can do a lot with a little trust.'[7] 'As a response in the present setting, the words of v 6 say in effect that what is needed is not the *increase* of faith, but the *exercise* of faith.'[8]

> Perhaps not surprisingly, the **disciples** realize in verse 5 that all this will require more faith than they think they have. Jesus is quick to respond. It's not great faith you need; it is faith in a great God.[9]

The certainty of the command for the tree to obey is emphasized. 'The verb [for obey] ὑπήκουσεν ἄν [*hypēkousev an*] strictly refers to a time prior to the

[4] D. M. Doriani, *NT252 Parables of Jesus* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2014).
[5] I.H. Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: a commentary on the Greek text* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Paternoster Press, 1978), 644.
[6] Strack & P. Billerbeck, *A Commentary on the New Testament from the Talmud & Midrash* (2022). J. N. Cerone, Ed.; A. Bowden & J. Longarino, Trans. (Lexham Press, 2022), Vol. 2, 273.
[7] Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 9:51-24:53* BECNT (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 1996), 1390.
[8] John Nolland, *Luke 9:21–18:34,* WBC 35B (Dallas, Texas: Word Books, 1993), 838.
[9] Tom Wright, *Luke for Everyone* (London: SPCK, 2004), 204.

command;'[10] as if to say that the tree was ready to obey before the command was given.[11]

We should not take this hyperbole literally. Even if we could move a mulberry tree into the sea, why would we? 'The saying is obviously a rhetorical reference to seemingly impossible things that could be done if one trusts in God. But, in this context the "spectacular" activity carried out by faith is that of forgiving a repentant believer.'[12]

> They don't need *more* faith, they just need to use what they have already got. The smallest possible amount of faith can work wonders, Jesus tells them. Why are they asking for more?[13]

How does this teaching about only needing a little faith make you feel about being able to forgive 7 times a day? Or indeed, enough faith to live as a disciple daily?

We have been talking about discipleship over the past few weeks and that we are all called to discipleship; and some of Jesus' teachings on this are hard! Do you find it encouraging that Jesus says that we only need a little faith to be able to live the life of the disciple? Or do you disagree.

Servants

In verses 7-10 Jesus offers a short parable. In the Lucan context this puts the heavy demands made in verses 5-6 into the context of slave and master.[14] 'The demands of vv 1–6 may be heavy, but their fulfillment creates no claim upon God. This is nothing more than the duty owed to him.'[15]

The parable starts like the parable of the lost sheep, with Jesus asking, 'who among you, having … would …'. Like the parable of the lost sheep, the expected answer is 'no, of course we would not do that.'

The logic of the parable is *a fortiori* (if *that* is true, how much more so for *this* to be true): if this applies on the level of human masters and servants, how much more so between humans and God.[16]

Background

The word translated 'servant' in the NIV is δοῦλος (*doulos)* – slave. It is important that we don't carry our modern understanding of slavery into interpreting the

[10] Marshall, 644.
[11] Bock, 1391.
[12] A.J. Thompson, *Luke,* Exegetical Guide to the Greek New Testament (Nashville, Tennessee: B&H Academic, 2016), 265.
[13] J. Williams, *Lectionary Reflections: Year C* (London: SPCK, 2003), 114.
[14] Nolland, 841.
[15] Nolland, 841.
[16] Craig L. Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, Second Edition (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012), 352.

parable. Bailey gives some insight into the nature of the middle-eastern master – slave relationship:

> In a technological age with the forty-hour week, powerful labor unions, and time and a half for overtime, the world of this parable seems not only distant but unfair. After a long, hard day in the field, such a servant surely has earned the right to a little appreciation, some comforts, and a few rewards. But Jesus is building on well-known and widely accepted patterns of behavior in the Middle East. The master-servant relationship, in its ancient and modern expressions, implies acceptance of authority and obedience to that authority. Yet the outsider needs to be sensitive to the security that this classical relationship provides for the servant and the sense of worth and meaning that is deeply felt on the part of a servant who serves a great man. These qualities of meaning, worth, security, and relationship are often tragically missing from the life of the modern industrial worker with his forty-hour week. The servant offers loyalty, obedience, and a great deal of hard work, but with an authentic Middle Eastern nobleman the benefits mentioned above are enormous. Because of these things, this master- servant image is profoundly appropriate for illustrating the believer's relationship to God and to His unique agent/Son.
>
> Jeremias has convincingly demonstrated that the introductory phrase (17:7) *tis ex humōn* ("which of you") is a phrase unique to Jesus that always expects an emphatically negative answer (Jeremias, Parables, 103; Bailey, Poet, 121f.). Certainly no one in any Middle Eastern audience could imagine any servant expecting special honors after fulfilling his duty in the field. The master is not indebted to him for having plowed the field or guarded the sheep. Then too, the afternoon meal (here specifically referred to in v. 8 by the verb *deipnēsō*, "I shall eat supper/dine''), is not at eight in the evening but rather in the late afternoon around three o'clock (Jeremias, Eucharistic, 44f.). Thus we are not dealing with harsh hours imposed by an unfeeling master but rather the normal expectations of a relatively short day's chores. The point is not, "Does the master allow the servant food and rest?" but rather, "Does he extend privilege to the servant who fulfills the daily assignment?" The clear answer is-no! [17]

In this parable, Jesus first asks the hearers to consider from the point of view of the master. Then he spins it on its head and points out that they are like the servant in the illustration, not the master.

Previously Jesus has told a parable of the 'Watchful Slaves' in Luke 12:35-40, where the watchful slaves are rewarded by the Master serving them. Later in Luke 22:27, Jesus tells his disciples that he is among them as one who serves. Even so,

[17] Kenneth E. Bailey *Poet & Peasant and Through Peasant Eyes: A Literary-Cultural Approach to the Parables in Luke* (United Kingdom: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1983) Through Peasant Eyes 119-120.

and in case we forget, Jesus is still the master, and this parable serves to remind the disciples (and us) of this.

Verse 9, 'Will he thank the servant because he did what he was told to do?' (NIV), is literally 'does he have grace/favor to the servant'. Bailey points out that from a Middle-Eastern context, this type of language carries the idea of 'does the Master owe him a debt?' The answer, of course, is no, and the same for the disciples. 'Slaves don't expect rewards for doing what they are there for, and neither should disciples.'[18]

Even those who manage to forgive others 7 times a day, are only doing their duty. God owes them nothing.[19]

The term translated 'unworthy' in verse 10, (ἀχρεῖος *achreios)*, means useless, or worthless. The servant is clearly worth something to the master, so worthless slave is probably not the best translation. Some have argued, based on etymology, more than historical usage, that the word means 'those to whom something is not due, owed.'[20]

> Thus the original parable instructs the disciples to say, "We are servants to whom nothing is owing, we have only done our duty."[21]

What do you think would be a good title for this parable? The unworthy slave? The unprofitable slave?

Does the picture of us as being slaves who are not owed anything change how you see our relationship with Jesus?

How does Jesus' teaching on the obedient servant impact your understanding of service?

What implications does it have for how we view others in the church (eg: do we honour some more based on what they do, because it is regarded as being more important)?

Some of you may have watched Downton Abbey. This may help us understand the concept a bit easier. In Downton Abbey, the upstairs family is the master, and the downstairs staff are the servants. The staff perform their duties diligently, and it is understood that their actions are part of their obligation. The servants know their position and know that their duty does not entitle them to special reward. Of

[18] Williams, 115.
[19] Bailey, Through Peasant Eyes, 121-122.
[20] Fitzmyer points to Kilgallen who offers this interpretation. Joseph Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke X-XXIV* Anchor Bible 28A (New York: Doubleday, 1985), 1147. Bailey also follows this view.
[21] 'This translation is etymologically possible. It makes profound sense in the context of the overall parable. Important early Arabic and Syriac translations give this reading, and we would submit that it is the best understanding of the text.' Bailey, Through Peasant Eyes, 124.

course, the comparison is not exact – I assume a servant in Downton Abbey could quit – a slave in the first century did not have that luxury.

Do you think it is appropriate to continue to use "slavery" language in talking about God and discipleship? Why or why not?[22]

Discuss: We knew an older lady who had been a missionary for many years. In her eighties she developed skin cancer on her scalp, which killed her. One of the other parishioners said to me that she was pretty mad at God for this, as the woman likely was over-exposed to the sun during her time as a missionary in PNG. I can understand the sentiment. But what do you think the attitude of the ex-missionary would have been?

[22] Some questions taken from Scott McKnight, *Luke*, New Testament Everyday Bible Study Series (Grand Rapids, Michigan: HarperChristian Resources, 2023), 262.