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## *Doing God A Favor* Luke 17:5-10

On this Veterans' Day Sunday, I want to ask you a question: How many of you are grateful that our men and women in uniform are willing to do their duty? How many find the word "duty" to be a noble and appropriate word to describe military service? Now...another question: how many think "duty" is a noble and appropriate word to describe Christian discipleship? How many have trouble with the phrase, "Doing my duty as a Christian?" Would you like to hear Jesus' opinion on this matter? (Fair warning; this passage ought to have a label on it that says: "This parable will be offensive to most Americans.")

So...did you find anything offensive about this passage? How about verse 7: "Suppose one of you had a servant..." The word literally is "slave." One out of every three persons in the Roman Empire was a slave; some taken in war; others sold into slavery to pay their debts. They were the possession of their master who had supreme rights over them. **Today, the idea that one man could be another man's property is repugnant to us.** But it was the reality in Jesus' time.

Here's something else offensive. This poor slave has been working all day—plowing the fields, chasing down stupid sheep—and he returns home, exhausted. Jesus plays out the drama. "Will the master say to the slave, 'Oh...you look so tired! Come in this house. Take off those dirty clothes. Sit down and let's get you something to eat?'" (**What's the answer to Jesus' question?**) Of course not. The slave, after working hard all day, comes in...and his work is not done. The master says, "Get yourself cleaned up, go make me a good dinner and serve it to me. Then...when I have eaten the last dainty and burped my last burp...**then** you can go in the kitchen and scrounge up something for yourself to eat."

What would we Americans want to say to the master? "Get your own dang dinner! I'm exhausted! I've been working all day and you've been sitting here watching ESPN. If you want something to eat, get up and fix it yourself!" Any moms here ever felt like that? Maybe said something like that? Well...if you were a slave, you didn't dare say it.

Anything else offensive? How about this: the slave doesn't even get a "thank you!" Verse 9: "Would [the master] thank the servant because he did what he was told to do?" If you are a boss you don't **have** to thank your employees for doing their job. But if you are a **smart** boss, you will learn to say, "Well done! I appreciate you." But not this guy. Not one word of thanks.

Even the punch line is offensive. Jesus swings the whole story back on the disciples; verse 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.'" So...how DO you like this parable? Is this anyone's life verse? Anyone going to go home and memorize it? It troubles us, doesn't it? But troubling passages fascinate me...especially when they come from the lips of Jesus. They make me **want** to figure out what the Holy Spirit is trying to teach me. So...let's dig in. .

Now to start, there's one thing to be really clear about: this parable is not about the nature of God. Jesus is NOT saying that God is a fat, lazy, ungrateful master sitting in heaven, watching TV, eating bon bons and waiting for his worthless slaves to wait on him. Those are exaggerated elements drawn from the way *everyone* knew things were in that day to enliven the story and help make his primary point.

So, then...what is his primary point? This: **when we live the way God wants us to live...we're not doing God any favors.** We're not earning extra brownie points. We are just doing what's right. When we live the way the Master tells us to live...we are simply doing our...what is the last word in the parable...duty! **We are doing God no favors when we live in obedience to him. We are just doing our duty.** That's what Jesus says.

Ouch! This is offensive too, isn't it? Christian life **as duty**...it doesn't sit very well with us. Duty is not a very popular word today. I spoke to a man who coaches executives in the largest companies in the world. I asked him, "How often do you talk about "duty" in your seminars?" His reply shocked me: "I have never talked about duty." "Really? You've **never** talked about duty to any Fortune 500 executive? Why not?" **"Because no one wants to be told what to do. People want to be inspired to act because of what they will get out of it, not because of a sense of obligation."**

Wow...I really struggled with that. Is it true that no one wants to do something just because it is the right thing to do? That we need to be inspired by how our actions will benefit us before we are willing to act? Is there nothing good or noble about doing our duty...not because it feels good at the moment ...or because of what we will get out of it... but because it is the right thing to do? **Is "duty" really dead in America?**

Well...not everywhere. We talked about the military. Isn't duty still a noble thing in the military? And how about police officers and fire fighters who run toward danger when everyone else is running away. Isn't that "duty?" Aren't they afraid to run into a burning building or into a robbery in progress? If they do what they are supposed to do even though they don't feel like it, isn't that "duty?" And isn't that noble?

What about parenting? Moms, do you change your babies' diapers because you find it personally fulfilling? Is there anything more dutiful than changing a poopy diaper? Or more noble? Dads, do you discipline your teenage son because you enjoy doing so? Or because it is your duty as a father to teach him how to live in an honorable way?

And what about marriage? I love my wife dearly. Our marriage is the best thing about my life. It is warm and passionate and life-giving...most of the time. But there are times when I don't necessarily feel all of those things. So if I happen to fly off on a business trip when Cyndi and I aren't doing so well, what's to keep me from looking for another woman in a hotel bar who might be nice to me? Duty! It is my duty to keep my vows, to be faithful to my wife, to forsake all others...whether I feel like it or not at any given moment. Isn't that the right and noble thing to do?

So, then...in the military, with first responders, in parenting, in marriage...there are times when it is right and noble to do our duty, yes? So...what is our duty to God? What is our duty as disciples of Jesus? How about this: **"Duty is doing whatever the Master says."** Notice it is **not** doing what the church tells you to do or what the preacher tells you to do. I **hope** that what you learn here is faithful to God's Word in helping you to understand what your Christian duty is. Unfortunately, many here this morning were raised in churches where Christian faith was all about duty. Legalistic. Rules-oriented. For you... the word "duty" rubs you raw, doesn't it?

But if the definition of Christian duty is simply, **"Doing whatever the Master says"**, is there anyone here who would not be willing to say, "OK. I will do my duty.?" Well, actually, yes... there are folks here this

morning who don't know what they think about this Christianity stuff. They haven't made Jesus the Master of their lives. So they have no feeling of duty to him.

But most of us here have spoken the words, "Jesus is my Lord and Savior," right? In three weeks, a brand new class of members will stand up here and declare, "Jesus is Lord." So what do we mean when we say those words? Doesn't it mean that Jesus is Master... he's my boss... he is in charge... whatever he says, that is my duty?

Do most American Christians **really mean** "Jesus is Lord" in this way? Doesn't seem likely, does it? When we say "Lord" many of us mean Jesus is our favorite guy in the sky. We like him better than we like Buddha or Mohammed. We think he's nicer. He tells better stories and we like the fact that he promises to bless us. We want to go to Heaven when we die. So when we say "Lord" we often mean that, of all the religious leaders, Jesus is the one we pick. And **if** we are going to do any religious stuff...any charitable work... make any donations...Jesus is our religious charity of choice. **If we are going to do any god any favors, Jesus is the one we'd rather do a favor for.**

But to say, "Jesus is **really** the Lord of my life...my boss...my master...and whatever he tells me to do ...that is my duty..."—I wonder how many of us can say that? Or even *want* to be able to say that?

Why would Jesus use the word "duty" to describe our discipleship? Didn't he know Americans would just hate that? Not all cultures do. When I shared this passage with our staff this week, Kwame, who comes from Africa said, "I don't understand this. In my country, doing your duty is the way you honor your family and your village. Everyone does their duty." Sounds just like America, doesn't it?

To the person who says, "Hey...I make it to church once or twice a month... I treat my employees fairly well... I say grace with my family at most dinner times... I throw \$20 in the plate when it comes around...I even went and worked on a park trail for Go Sunday...look at all I'm doing..." ...Jesus would say...what? "I'm glad you're doing those things. **But you are not doing God any favors.** If you are seeking to live and love and give and speak and serve in a way that honors the one you call Master, you aren't adding up brownie points; you are doing—(what)—you are doing your duty to God.

Now what does that duty look like? Well, first of all, duty is not dependent upon my feelings. Duty is about doing the right thing at the right time all the time no matter how I feel. **And** duty is having a sense of being a part of a mission that is worthy of our devotion...worthy of our sacrifice. Soldiers do their duty on the battlefield because they believe in the mission of defending liberty and protecting their comrades. Firefighters do their duty by rushing into burning buildings because they believe in the mission of saving lives. Mothers do their duty by changing dirty diapers—among a million other things—because they believe in the mission of raising healthy human beings.

So...do you believe in our mission? Do you believe that Chapel Hill has a mission that is worthy and noble...and deserving of your duty? If you don't, this parable and this message and every invitation to participate more sacrificially with your time and talent and your money...**will always offend you.** Every stewardship sermon will give you cause to complain to one another in the restaurants and grocery store aisles. And if you do not consider our mission to be worthy of you...of course you will have no sense of duty—never mind any loving commitment—to it. Of course!

But if you do...if you think that what God is doing here matters...if you think our presence on this hill makes a difference in this community...will you please ask your Master what he wants you to do? Not just financially but in every other way. What is the duty to which Jesus calls you? Not Pastor Mark or the elders or anyone else. What does the Master want **you** to do? That is the only duty that matters.

I have one last thing to say about this. I don't believe "duty" is the supreme value in Christian discipleship. If it were, Jesus would have said that the Great Commandment is, "Do your duty." That is the great commandment in Islam. Not in Christianity. The Great Commandment is to love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength and to love your neighbor as yourself.

I don't want to **live in duty**. Do you? I don't want a marriage that is **just** about duty. I want a marriage that is mostly about love, joy, intimacy, friendship. I don't want my prayer life to be **just** about duty. I want my daily time with God to bring me into his presence and transform me. I don't want my giving to be just about duty. I have always given at least ten percent of my income to the local church. Always. My dad taught me to do that. But I returned from a sabbatical one year realizing that, although I was a dutiful giver, I was not always a cheerful giver. That's not what I long for.

I am a dutiful guy. It's the way I'm wired. But I have discovered in my later life, I don't want my life to be all or even mostly about duty. I want it to be about love and joy and gratitude. Don't you? **But when my love wanes...when my joy turns to sorrow... when my gratitude feels more like envy, I have discovered that "duty" is wonderful a spiritual backstop for me.**

I was so happy that the Giants took the World Series. My Grandpa Burt was a **huge** Giants fan. (When they won, Cooper shouted, "I'll bet Grandpa Burt is popping out of his grave." I said, "Grandpa Burt was cremated." Cooper said, "I'll bet he's popping out of his urn, then.") One of the many differences between the big leagues and the baseball you and I played as kids is...there is no backstop in the big leagues. If the pitcher throws a wild pitch, there is nothing to stop it from causing real damage.

Duty can be the spiritual backstop in our lives. We do not want to live in "oughts" and "shoulds" all the time. We want to live in loving joyful, gracious obedience. But when those things get fuzzy...when I don't feel loving or joyful or gracious or obedient... **it doesn't hurt to have a clear sense of what is right...**and a pre-determination to do it...even when I don't feel like it. That is duty.

But when you take a baseline of duty and add to that love and passion and joy...then you've hit the sweet spot. When God transforms your sense of duty into a longing for his kingdom...it changes everything. So what is your longing for your church? Do you have a longing for the children who are gathered in classes throughout this building? Do you have a longing to reach the poor broken soul who walked in here this morning... reach him with the love and hope of Christ? Do you have a longing to feed the poor or keep the lights on in the home of someone who lost her job or provide counsel to a suicidal teenager?

Chapel Hill isn't the only church in town. There are a lot of great churches in Gig Harbor doing wonderful things for the Master. This is not the only place to be a part of the mission of Christ in this community. And there are churches that might require less of you. But if this IS where you believe God is calling you to be...then may I ask you, beloved...**what is your Master calling you to do?** With your time, your talents, your money, your witness in the workplace, your care for your family, your leadership, your service to the community, your involvement in Life Groups or Sunday School...what is your Master calling you to do. Would you ask him? And when he tells you, may God give you the faith to do what the Master says.

## **SERMON DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

### **Luke 17:5-10**

**Reflect & Apply Individually:** Each person take 5-7 minutes to circle words or phrases that jumped out at them; jot down your reflections; check the notes in your Study Bible for insight or help. Grapple with what the Spirit is saying to you, your group, the church - write down some applications.

**Reflect & Apply Together:** Share your thoughts. Don't teach! Listen and reflect on God's word together; grapple with what God is calling us to do and be through this passage.

**Pray together:** tell the Lord one thing you are thankful for and lay one concern before the Lord.

### **Dig deeper**

1. This parable does not sit very well with Americans. Why? Do you find it disturbing? Why?
2. The apostles asked Jesus to "increase their faith... How does his response in 6-10 address that request?
3. There are at least two things we might find distasteful in verse 10. What are they?
4. What does Jesus seem to be saying about our "duty" as his disciples? What role does mission play? Are you dutiful in the sense that Jesus requires? Why or why not? What does this parable call forth from you?