



Going Above and Beyond?

He sat listening intently, but as I made eye contact with him I could tell he wasn't buying the good news of God's grace. His facial gestures revealed an inner-war taking place somewhere between his heart and his head—the ongoing war between law and grace. I've seen the look many times, and I could see my sermon on grace challenged and offended his closely guarded religious beliefs.

When I finished my message, he was the first to greet/attack me after we finished the worship service. "I think you are soft on sin," he said resolutely. "Of course I agree with grace, but you seem to ignore the many places in the Bible that teach us that we have to work hard before God will accept us, bless us and reward us!"

Several others crowded around, anticipating a 15-round spiritual heavyweight boxing match, so it seemed that this would be a good place and time for part two of my sermon. I followed his lead—I told him I would be happy to discuss any of the "places" where the Bible seemed to agree with his understanding of how God relates to us.

"Well, the one place that I could not stop thinking about when you were speaking was about being an unprofitable servant. Jesus said that if we only do the things we're told to do then we will be unprofitable. Obviously he was telling us we have to go above and beyond in our obedience."

I suggested we all take a few moments for a little Bible study about the passage he had in mind. Everyone agreed. I thought that you might enjoy hearing some of the highlights of that discussion. The passage we'll be considering is Luke 17:10:

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.' This verse concludes a story Jesus told his disciples, a hypothetical parable that begins in verse seven. Jesus proposes a "what-if" kind of story—suppose you had a slave, someone

who worked for you in a variety of tasks. One day you assign him to work in your garden or field. When he is finished with that job, will you relieve him of his next duty of preparing your evening meal? Or will the servant, who without a doubt has worked hard in the fields all day, still be expected to prepare and serve you dinner? Jesus concluded that you will have your slave do his job, which is to prepare and serve you first, and then he can have his dinner.

This parable sounds so out of touch to our Western world and its 21st century of legislated minimum wages, labor unions and OSHA regulations, doesn't it? The person in Jesus' hypothetical is not simply a disadvantaged day laborer, an illegal alien who might be taken advantage of. This person is a slave. Some might conclude that Jesus is telling us to crack the whip, so that anyone who works for us would never think that we were soft on sin—or soft on anything for that matter.

The man who challenged me after my sermon didn't seem to be concerned about how this passage might direct us to treat others, but he was convinced about what it says about how God treats us. He absolutely believed this teaching of Jesus [the unprofitable servant] proves that God will not put up with spiritual slackers. He believed that Jesus was telling his disciples, and us by extension, that we must earn every spiritual penny from God by the sweat of our brow.

I felt deep empathy for the grim-faced man who felt he was defending his religious values against me, his adversary, the soft-on-sin purveyor of grace. I prayed that I might help this man who was obviously a captive of religion, that he might see the wonders and power of God's grace.

I told him and the group gathered around that the context of Jesus' teachings reveals a culture of extreme poverty and egregious social conditions. Jesus tells us of debtors who are unable to pay being cast into prison. His

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Making Sense of God's Silence

Is God really there? If he is, why does it sometimes seem as though he is silent at the times we need him most? Or—could it be that God has already spoken and doesn't need to repeat himself? Could it be that we don't hear him because he's saying things we don't want to hear? When God actually visited the earth and spoke, many religious people were not happy with what he had to say! In this inspiring four-part audio cassette series, you'll find out that times when God appears to be silent can be times he's acting powerfully in the background.

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commentary

parables speak of beggars lying at the gates of those who are rich. And Jesus talks about slaves.

As difficult as it was to be poor in Jesus' day, it was harder still to be a slave. Slaves worked until the work was done, not from 8-5. A slave's life was work, and the work was never done. The setting of this parable is the life of a slave. As humans, we may either be slaves to our flesh and our ego, or we may choose to be slaves of Jesus.

Christians voluntarily become the slaves of Jesus. We know, of course, that Jesus does not ask anything of us that he was not willing to perform himself—Paul tells us that Jesus “made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant” (Philippians 2:7). Jesus did what no one else *would* do, and more importantly, he did what no one else *could* do.

Consider the primary lesson of this parable. First, here's what Jesus is NOT saying. He is not saying that God is only happy when we are doing our time as a slave on some religious chain gang. Jesus is not saying that God is an overlord who will only let us rest and eat our dinner once he has eaten his fill.

Here's what Jesus IS saying. Jesus is saying that no matter how hard we work serving our Lord and Savior, nothing we ever do will ever be enough to earn his grace. The hardest work by the most able and most diligent Christian is unworthy. *We are all unprofitable servants.*

Jesus is saying that no matter how great a day we might have in the fields of the Lord, no matter how much we have planted, weeded, picked or harvested, we are not humanly capable of ever doing enough to earn us a place at the Lord's table. Nothing we can do will obligate God to invite us to sit down at his table.

We do sit at his table, but this teaching in Luke reminds us that we don't have the spiritual resources to pay for the privilege of feasting at his table. The only way we sit at his table is through Jesus, who alone is worthy and profitable to invite us to the Lord's Table.

This does not mean that Christians do not work in the fields of the Lord. Of course we are his servants. We serve the Master. We obey him. But our obedience does not earn his love. Our deeds do not merit his grace. No human achievement can ever pay for the matchless and supreme gift of God.

Jesus is saying that we should never sit back and assess our spiritual value based on what we produce humanly. We are arrogant if we think that God is blessed to have hard-working servants like us serving him. A more appropriate response to God is to give him thanks for the privilege we have to serve him. Any reward that God gives us is not earned as payment for our services, but it is given because God is gracious. No Christian may boast before God (see Romans 3:27 and Ephesians 2:8-9), because each of us, at the end of our best spiritual day working in the fields of our Lord, is unworthy/unprofitable.

In giving God our all, we are giving back nothing more than a small infinitesimal fraction of what we owe for freeing us from the slavery of sin and religious legalism. As Christians we are free in Christ, and because of that freedom we willingly work for our Master.

This teaching of Jesus is a shot across the bow of religious legalism, which is powered by the strength of its slaves who toil like hamsters on a wheel, never able to produce enough for their religious masters. Jesus is saying that no religious exercise, formula, ceremony or ritual can turn a slave into a free person. Only Jesus can give us freedom.

What an irony that religious legalism has co-opted this passage and turned it into a call for individuals to jump through never-ending hoops in a futile attempt to earn God's good graces!

We are unprofitable servants, but thanks be to God we have a Savior who was the perfect Lamb of God in our stead. He has done what we can never do, for he alone is worthy—he alone is profitable. □

—Greg Albrecht