

# Giving Thanks to the Master

BY GREG ALBRECHT

**S**ome people think they can't experience a time of Thanksgiving without turkey, pumpkin pie and cranberry sauce. Some think that they can't experience a time of Thanksgiving (in Canada the second Monday in October and in the United States the last Thursday of November) unless they travel to a specific place and visit with specific people. Some summarize a perfect time of Thanksgiving as including the four F's—food, family, friends and football!

But of course real thanksgiving is not determined by food or specific traditions or by travel—the one necessary ingredient to any time of thanksgiving, whether it is a national day celebrated in October or November, or whether it is any day of the year—the absolute necessary ingredient is the Master—Jesus Christ—the One toward whom our thanksgiving is directed.

Luke 17:7-10:

*“Suppose one of you has a servant plowing or looking after the sheep. Will he say to the servant when he comes in from the field, ‘Come along now and sit down to eat’? Won’t he rather say, ‘Prepare my supper, get yourself ready and wait on me while I eat and drink; after that you may eat and drink’? Will he thank the servant because he did what he was told to do? 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.’”*

The only sermons or exhortations I have heard based on this passage all had to do with a corrective message, telling me and others listening that we were unprofitable servants, and in order to become profitable servants we needed to do more, give more and work harder.

I assure you that no such meaning or interpretation was intended by the Master who gave us this parable.

and in many cases those individuals were what we could call slaves today.

Since slavery is evil, why then is Jesus talking about it? Jesus, as he often does in his parables, is using a physical illustration from the culture of his day to draw and impart a spiritual lesson.

Jesus did not then condone slavery nor does he now. He talked about slaves and servants as examples, be-



...real thanksgiving is not determined by food or specific traditions or by travel...the absolute necessary ingredient is the Master—Jesus Christ—the One toward whom our thanksgiving is directed.

Jesus presents two main characters in this parable—the master and the master's slave. As we begin to study this parable we must discuss slavery. For us, in this 21st century, slavery is such a moral evil that we can't imagine Jesus using slavery as an example. But the parables of Jesus are filled with references to servants and stewards—

cause they represented a large segment of that society.

The people to whom Jesus ministered were living in an occupied country—in that sense they were slaves themselves. The Jews in Palestine at that time were occupied by a military power, they were heavily taxed and they were oppressed.

Jesus ministered during a time when slavery was a major part of life. Estimates vary—some say that one out of every four people who lived under the control of the Roman Empire was a slave. While slavery was and is barbaric, Jesus taught spiritual truth based on this evil practice.

When North Americans hear the word “slavery” today most of us think

come a bond-servant in several ways:

- You could have been a prisoner of war, captured when the armies of Rome overcame another nation or state, and thus forced into a life of slavery to your captors.
- You could have become a bond-servant because of your poverty—you were so in debt that you had to sell your services to pay that debt.

of our world today usually is barbaric, brutal and inhumane, some slave owners in the Roman Empire treated their slaves with kindness.

Sometimes a slave, particularly a younger slave, was actually adopted by the master and considered as an equal heir with other children. The New Testament of course uses this picture as one illustration of the relationship God offers to us, by his grace.

### Three Grace-Based Lessons

With that said, let’s note three major themes and lessons we can learn from this parable:

1) All humans, then and now, are, in one way or another, enslaved. This is not to minimize the evil of actually owning another human being, but it is important to realize the spiritual implications and lessons Jesus, and other New Testament writers, drew from the barbaric institution of slavery.

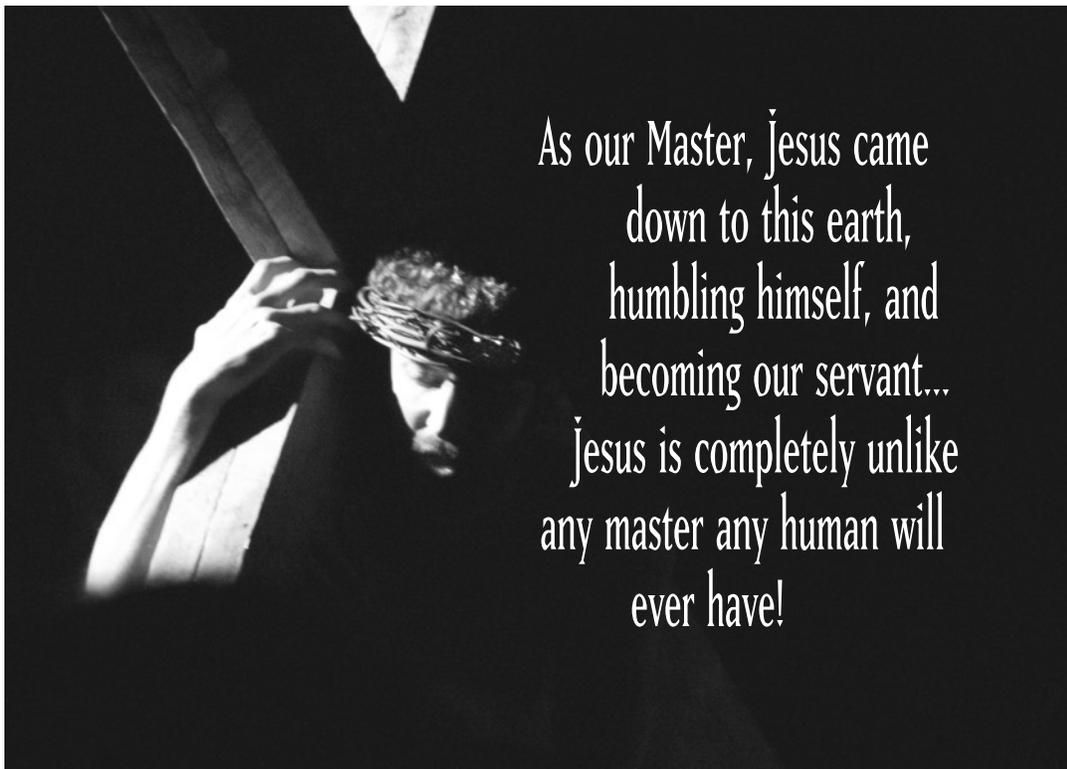
We are either slaves to sin (addicted to any number of human behaviors or practices, and that includes Christ-less religion by the way) or we are voluntarily slaves of Jesus—and when we are his

servants, we are free in Christ.

In that regard Peter begins his second letter by saying, “Simon Peter, a bond-servant and apostle of Jesus Christ.” James begins the book that bears his name by saying, “James, a bond-servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.” Jude begins his brief letter with these words, “Jude, a bond-servant of Jesus Christ and a brother of James.” And Paul begins the majestic book of Romans by writing, “Paul, a bond-servant of Jesus Christ...”

Here’s what Paul says to the Galatians, admonishing them not to go back into religious slavery by willingly subjecting themselves to the old covenant, the law of Moses:

- In Galatians 4:8-9 he says, “Formerly, when you did not know God, you were slaves to those who by nature are not gods. But now that you know God—or rather are known by God— how is it



As our Master, Jesus came down to this earth, humbling himself, and becoming our servant... Jesus is completely unlike any master any human will ever have!

of the time just prior to the American Civil War, a little over 150 years ago, when there were over four million slaves in this country.

By way of contrast, when Jesus walked this earth, estimates vary, but there may have been almost three million slaves in Italy alone, supporting the economy of the country in which the city of Rome was located,

• Your parents might have been slaves, and by virtue of your birth you became a slave—many were born as slaves in the Roman Empire. Most slaves were produced this way—adult slaves gave birth to slave children just as cattle or sheep would breed and produce young. Slaves were property.

• In some cases, if an otherwise free couple had a baby but could not

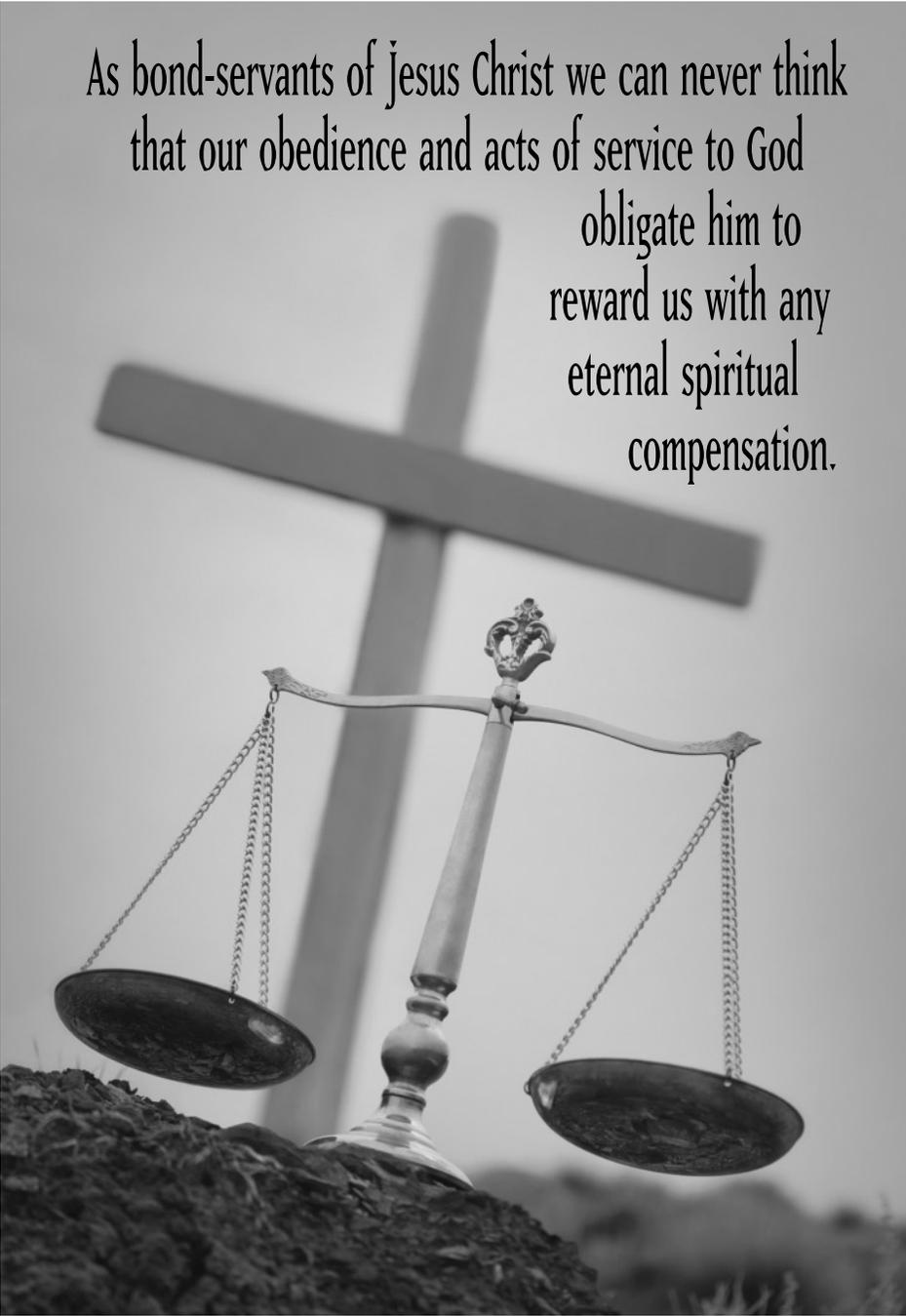
...the parable means that we are unable, given the relationship God gives to us, to deserve his love on the basis of our accomplishments.

and whose name was given to the vast empire it managed and controlled. The Roman empire survived and thrived on the backs of millions of slaves.

During those days you could be-

provide for it, given their impoverishment, then there were times when their baby became the property of a slave owner.

While there is no question that slavery was, and sadly in some parts



As bond-servants of Jesus Christ we can never think that our obedience and acts of service to God obligate him to reward us with any eternal spiritual compensation.

*you are turning back to those weak and miserable forces? Do you wish to be enslaved by them all over again?"*

• And in Galatians 5:1 he encourages them, *"It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again with a yoke of slavery."*

So you and I must ask ourselves—whom will we serve? Will we be enslaved by sin and by religious teaching or will we accept being free in Christ, which means being his bond-servant?

We know that the man in Jesus' parable was a common slave, a bond-

servant, because after a hard day's work on the farm he wasn't allowed to eat until he first prepared dinner for his master.

Again, don't think that Jesus is condoning such a practice. He's not offering his opinion about the practice, he's merely using it as an illustration. That's not the way he treated his disciples.

All Jesus was saying is that it was normal—the common etiquette of the day was for the master and his family to eat first, and then the slaves would eat, and sometimes all they had to eat was what was left.

In many of Jesus' parables, as is the case with this one, the parable talks about the normal and the expected—until Jesus drops a bombshell. Jesus would often isolate a particular situation, something to which his listeners could easily relate, drawing them into the story, and then drawing a completely unexpected lesson.

The disciples were listening to Jesus' description of the bond-servant, and nothing seemed out of the ordinary. In fact, they might have been thinking of themselves as the master.

The disciples might have been thinking of themselves as the owner of the farm, and thinking that Jesus would probably tack on a moral to the story—something like "So, like a slave-owner, when you become apostles, don't let people get too familiar with you. You have to keep their respect. Remember to keep your distance. Remember that you are in charge. Be a strong leader."

But then Jesus concludes the parable with the completely unexpected, bombshell-like lesson, *"So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, 'We are unworthy bond-servants; we have only done our duty.'"*

So Jesus was saying that his disciples were bond-servants and he was the master!

With that in mind, let's consider a second major theme and lesson of this parable:

2) Christians must beware of thinking that God owes us something for what we have done.

A physical bond-servant in the Roman Empire did not work for pay—they worked because they were owned by their master. In a similar way, we as Christians do not work for pay—we serve Christ because he owns us, he bought and paid for us.

As bond-servants of Jesus Christ we can never think that our obedience and acts of service to God obligate him to reward us with any eternal spiritual compensation.

May we never think so highly of our efforts and accomplishments so as to think that God owes us special favors.

This parable does not mean we have to work harder to gain God's acceptance and love so that one day we can be a profitable servant—the parable means that we are unable, given

the relationship God gives to us, to deserve his love on the basis of our accomplishments.

Further, here's a third insight—a third theme:

3) As our Master, Jesus is completely unlike any other master.

As our Master, Jesus came down to this earth, humbling himself, and becoming our servant. The Master is actually our servant—a relationship which clarifies what it means to be a bond-servant of Jesus Christ. Jesus is completely unlike any master any human will ever have!

Let's go back to verse nine for a moment. Here Jesus asks if the master will thank the bond-servant after the bond-servant works all day in the field and then prepares dinner for the master before eating himself.

The word "thank" in vs. 9 is the Greek word "*charis*." It's often translated as grace, sometimes as "favor" or "credit."

Jesus is saying, in effect, "Don't expect to earn credits with me by doing what you have been asked to do. You can't earn anything in our relationship, any more than a bond-servant can earn anything in his or her relationship with their master."

The bond-servant or slave isn't given any special privileges because he or she fulfills his or her duties.

Grace is not something we earn from God—grace is God's gift, given to us in spite of our performance and efforts, not because of it.

We cannot earn God's grace because we are the bond-servants of Jesus Christ. We are, in that sense, unworthy servants—for truly only



...the illustration of the master and the slave is a picture of God's willingness to take us in all of our spiritual unworthiness and imperfection and spiritually re-birth us, making us a part of his very own family.

God is ultimately and eternally worthy. We are unworthy in the sense that our obedience does not merit anything before God.

And yet, even in our unworthiness, even though we are bond-servants of Jesus Christ, bought and paid for, still God lavishes all blessings on us, even

to the point that God the Father adopts us as his very own children. We are heirs of the kingdom—but nothing we can ever do can in any way earn us that status.

This is not to say, of course, that we don't have duties and responsibilities as the bond-servants of Jesus Christ.

We live in God's house—he provides for us, and he gives us the opportunity to cook, to clean, to plant and to harvest. He does not owe us anything for our work, but we owe him everything. We are thankful for that.

The imagery of the master and slave is important for us as we come to a deeper appreciation of the loving relationship God offers to us.

The master and slave relationship we have with Jesus, our Master, is not one that is about a brutal, unforgiving and abusive relationship.

It is a relationship that actually helps us give thanks for being free from being slaves of sin and religion, now enabled to serve a loving and gracious Master.

And of course the illustration of the master and the slave is a picture of God's willingness to take us in all of our spiritual unworthiness and imperfection and spiritually re-birth us, making us a part of his very own family.

What then are we thankful for? Most of all, we are not thankful for a what—we are thankful for a Who.

We are thankful, in the ultimate, final, highest and supreme sense for the immeasurable grace of our Master. Most of all, we give thanks to the Master. □