

# PARABLES, “THROUGH PEASANTS EYES!”

Study 51, “The Obedient Servant,” Part V, Luke 17:7-10

## THE OBEDIENT SERVANT: LUKE 17:7-10

1. STANZA 1:

“Can you imagine having a servant  
Plowing or keeping sheep,  
Who on coming in from the field  
You say to him, ‘Come at once and recline to eat?’”

SERVANT  
FULFILLING ORDERS  
ORDERS FULFILLED  
REWARDS?

2. STANZA 2:

“Will he not rather say to him,  
‘Prepare something for me and I shall dine,  
And gird yourself to serve me,  
Till I eat and drink,  
And afterward you shall eat and drink?’”

SERVE THE MASTER  
THEN YOURSELF

3. STANZA 3:

“Does the servant have special merit?  
Because he did what was commanded?  
So you, also, when you have done what  
was commanded-  
say ‘Nothing is owing us servants, we  
have only done our duty.’”

SERVANTS  
ORDERS FULFILLED  
  
ORDERS FULFILLED  
  
REWARDS?

1. The theological application of this carefully written p is weighty indeed. Clearly we are again talking about salvation and good works. The Jewish commentary on the Psalms (Midrash Tehillim,) in explaining Psalm 1 reads, ‘Not for their works were the children Israelites redeemed from Egypt, but so that God might make himself and eternal name, and because of his favor. (Montifiore, Rabannic). In commenting on this p Montifiore mentions the rabbinic doctrine of ‘tit for tat,’ ‘In no other point is Jesus’ antagonism to, and reaction against, certain tendencies

in that teaching more justified and more wholesome than here. (Montifiore, Gospels II). For Jesus salvation was a gift. In addition to works and salvation there is the related topic of motivation for service and its results. Do we serve in order to gain? Having served to we have claims on God? This p says "NO" to both questions. 13. Some contemporary voices supported Jesus' view here set forth. In the Sayings of the Fathers (Pirke Aboth) one Simeon the Just (300 b.c) is reported to have said, "Be slaves who serve the master not with a view to receive a present; and let the fear of Heaven be upon you." (Mishna Pirke Aboth). Hunter observes, "The p of the farmer and his man therefore warns us against importuning into religion that book-keeping mentality which imagines we can rip up credit with God by our works. Jesus says it can't be done. So does the Apostle Paul.

2. The Egyptian writer Sa'id sees the p as relating specifically to the doctrine of justification and affirms that God's grace can't be earned. This is abundantly clear when the original language is allowed to surface under the traditional translation. The p. asks the question, "Does he (God) have grace/merit for the servant because he did what he was commanded?" The answer is "no!" Jeremias is correct in identifying the p. as "a demand for renunciation of all Pharisaic self-righteousness!" (Jeremias).
3. A final question is, Who is the master? The first and foremost answer is clearly God. Are there any Christological implications for this p? Again these are probably more overheard than heard. Yet they are unavoidably present. Jesus is addressed as "Master," all through the tradition. The disciple in the Oriental world has always been and remains in traditional society a servant of the master. The student/disciple literally waits hand and foot on the teacher. He often sleeps in his quarters and provides the services of a house servant. Foerster describes the 1<sup>st</sup> century disciple; "The pupil took his turn in preparing the common meal and catering of the general needs of the group. He performed personal services for his teacher, observed his conduct and was a respectable, loving humble companion."
4. Jesus is God's unique agent and as such he is the master of the disciples and they are his servants. Certainly these Christological implications

develop in the understanding of the post-Easter church, but we would suggest that they are already present in the p. in its original setting.

5. Finally, we need to ask what was the response that the p. intended to evoke from the disciples and what is the theological cluster used to elicit that response? The listening disciples were perhaps pressed to perceive. "We are servants whose finest efforts earn us no merit with our master. As servants/slaves we do our duty and expect no pay." This hoped for response is evoked by the use of a number of theological motifs. We would cautiously suggest the following;
  - a. The believer is a servant/slave. They are expected to obey and know their place as a servant.
  - b. Grace/Salvation is a gift, not a reward for their services rendered.
  - c. The servant of God labors to fulfill a duty. He does not develop a claim on God nor serve to receive awards.
  - d. God is the master of the believer. Yet, at the same time, the believer's servanthood is appropriately fulfilled in obedience to God's unique agent/Son Jesus who should be served with diligence and loyalty.
6. In passing, we note that the topic of rewards is given great attention in the synoptic material. Bultmann succinctly summarizes the subject: "Jesus promises rewards to those who are obedient w/o thought of reward." (Bultmann).

Thus the mighty theme of the nature of God's grace is set forth. Here it is stated negatively. The most hardworking servant/slave knows that nothing is owing him because of who he is. He does his duty and earns no merit. Obviously the master's gifts come unmerited and unearned and so it is with God.