

Parable of

***THE UNPROFITABLE SERVANTS***

Luke 17:7-10

by

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It has been much debated whether any connexion at all is to be traced, and if any, what connexion, between this parable and its immediate context. Expositors not a few have either expressly denied that any such existed, or have, at all events, been at no pains to trace it. Those, on the other hand, who assert a connexion, do not always trace the same. Thus Augustine, who acknowledges the difficulty which meets him here, has a singular scheme of linking on the parable with that which went before it, and one very forced and unnatural. I must be content to refer to it,<sup>1</sup> as fairly to state it would occupy more space than its merits warrant. Theophylact finds the following link between the parable and the verse preceding. The Lord had there declared the mighty works which a living faith would enable his disciples to perform; but then, lest a knowledge of this should entangle them in a snare of pride, a parable which should keep them humble is added.<sup>2</sup> Olshausen suggests as follows. The Apostles by that account of the hindrances they would meet (ver. 1,2), of the hard duties, hard as then they seemed, which were required of them (ver. 3,4), had a longing awakened in them after a speedier rest and reward. The Lord will make them understand that their work, difficult or not, welcome or unwelcome, must be done; that they are not their own, but his, and set to labour for Him: if they found their labour a delight, well; but if not, it was not the less to be accomplished. Instead of looking for recompense and release from toil at once, they should take example of the servant, who, albeit he had been strenuously labouring all the day long in the field, '*plowing or feeding cattle,*' yet not the less, when he returned to the house, resumed his labours there. Doubtless this is an important truth, and one involved in the parable; but that, '*Lord, increase our faith,*' or, '*Lord, give to us more faith,*' which calls it out, involves no such meaning as Olshausen traces in it; I cannot recognize in this petition the voice of those desirous of escaping a dispensation committed to them, or snatching prematurely at a reward.

Altogether different from these interpretations, and suggesting a quite different connexion, is one first proposed by Grotius; and by Venema<sup>3</sup> taken up and strengthened with additional arguments and illustrations. The parable, they say, does not represent at all

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<sup>1</sup> *Quæst. Evang.* ii. 39.

<sup>2</sup> So Cajetan: 'The Apostles had sought that the gift of faith might be added to them, and we understand that it was so given. And since also pride lies in wait for good works to destroy them, therefore Jesus adds this parable to keep the Apostles in the true knowledge of themselves, so that they be not lifted up.'

<sup>3</sup> *Diss. Sac.* p. 262, seq.

the standing of the faithful under the New Covenant or 'perfect law of liberty,' but the merely servile standing of the Jew under the old; and it grew in this manner out of the discourse preceding. The disciples had asked for increase of faith. The Lord, who will grant their request, will at the same time magnify the value of the gift which they ask. That value is so transcendent that all works done without this living principle of obedience are merely servile, and justly recompensed with a merely servile reward; God taking no pleasure in them, and counting that He owes no thanks for them; they who bring such to pass being '*unprofitable servants*' after all. They object to any other interpretation, that it sets in a light which is not that of the New Covenant the relations of Christ and his people. Is it likely, they ask, that the same gracious Lord who elsewhere has said, 'Henceforth I call you not servants, . . . but I have called you friends,' should here seek to bring them under bondage again? should put them in relations with Himself not filial but servile: beforehand declaring that, however much they might labour for Him, He would owe them no thanks for all? How, they demand, does this agree either with the spirit of the letter or words such as these, 'Blessed are those servants, whom the lord when he cometh shall find watching: verily, I say unto you, *that he shall gird himself*, and make them sit down to meat, and will come forth and serve them' (Luke 12:37)? But all these embarrassments, they affirm disappear, so soon as the parable is regarded as setting forth the relation of the Jewish people to God. They were hired to do a certain work, which if they did, they were, like servants, free from stripes; they ate and drank; they received their earthly reward. But advancing no further than to this bare fulfilling of things expressly enjoined<sup>4</sup> them, and fulfilling even these without love or zeal or the filial spirit of faith, stopping short so soon as ever they dared, and serving in the oldness of the letter, they were '*unprofitable servants*,' in whom their Lord could take no pleasure, and who could look for no further marks of favour at his hands.<sup>5</sup>

4 Origen (*In Rom.* iii.) lays the same stress on τα διαταχθέντα, though his purpose is different: 'Until a man has done his duty, i.e. all that is commanded him, he is an unprofitable servant (Luc. xvii. 10). But if thou addest aught to what is commanded, then thou wilt be no longer an unprofitable servant, but it shall be said to thee, "Well done, good and faithful servant" (Matt. xxv.21).' Bernard too (*In Cant. Serm.* xi. 2), without making Origen's dangerous use of the passage, and lowering the standard of obedience for the ninety-nine, in the hope of exalting it for the one, has implicitly the same explanation. He is speaking, on Cant. 1:2, of a service, rendered indeed, but without alacrity or joy, and ends thus: 'Lastly in the Gospel he who does only that which it is his duty to do is accounted an unprofitable servant. It may be that after a fashion I fulfil the commandments, but amid them all my soul is like a land without water. In order therefore that my sacrifice may be made fat, my prayer is, let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth.' So too Jeremy Taylor, *The Doctrine and Practice of Repentance*, i. 4, 15.

5 Grotius (in loc.) is rich in materials in support of this interpretation. We might add to these one of the *Similitudes* in the *Shepherd* of Hermas (iii. sim. 5), which is briefly this: A householder planted a vineyard, and going from home, left his servant the task of tying the vines to their supports, and no more; but the servant having finished this task, thought it would profit the vineyard, if also he were to weed it and dig it, which he did; and the master found it in high order and beauty on his return. Well pleased with his servant, because he had thus done more than was enjoined him, he determined to give him the adoption of sonship, and to make him fellow-heir with his own son. Seneca (*De Benef.* iii. 18-28) treats an interesting question bearing on the present subject: 'Can a slave confer a kindness upon his lord?' which he answers in the

All this is ingeniously and plausibly urged; and yet does not carry such conviction with it as need compel us to go back from the ordinary exposition. I shall attempt in the interpretation to meet the difficulties which have thus been urged. It is thus that the parable commences: *'But which of you, having a servant plowing or feeding cattle, will say unto him by and by, when he is come from the field, Go and sit down to meat?'* Before proceeding any further let me observe that *'by and by'* does not at this present mean exactly the same which it meant when our Version was made. It was then equivalent to *'straightway'* (thus compare Mark 6:25; Luke 11:9); and is used with this meaning here. The purpose of the verse is obscured for the English reader by this change in the force of the phrase, as becomes evident, if we substitute *'straightway'* for it. But to attain the exact sense of the original it will need further to join this *'by and by,'* or this *'straightway,'* with the command which follows it, *'Go straightway, and sit down to meat,'* and not with *'say,'* which went before. *'And will not rather say unto him, Make ready wherewith I may sup, and gird thyself, and serve me, till I have eaten and drunken, and afterward thou shalt eat and drink?'* To wait at table with the dress succinct or girded up, was a mark of servitude,<sup>6</sup> to keep which in mind enhances the condescension of the Son of God in his saying (Luke 12:37), and in his doing (John 13:4). *'Doth he thank that servant because he did the things that were commanded him? I trow not. So likewise ye, when ye shall have done all those things which are commanded you, say,'*<sup>7</sup> *We are unprofitable<sup>8</sup> servants: we have done that which was our duty to do.'*

To recur to the objections of Grotius and Venema; no doubt the relations of the faithful to their Lord *are* set forth here under a less gracious aspect than is usual in the New Covenant. And yet this word of our Lord need not be opposed to such other words of his as that which was just now urged (Luke 12:37). It should rather be accepted as furnishing the counterweight and complement of all such. This is the way God *might* deal; for it is not asserted that thus He *will* deal; since rather that other is the manner in which He will actually bear Himself towards his faithful servants. One relation according

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affirmative: 'So long as he renders that which is wont to be exacted from slaves [τα διαταχθέντα] it is service, but when he does more than it is needful for a slave to do, it is kindness: as soon as it attains to the affection of a friend, it ceases to be called service. . . . Whatever exceeds the rule of a slave's duty, whatever is rendered not as commanded but from goodwill, is a kindness.' This interpretation is Wetstein's as well: 'There are servants who serve in a servile spirit, that is, who do nothing unless they are bid: there are others who serve in a spirit of freedom even as sons. These, without waiting for a command, out of the goodness and nobility of their disposition, do of their own accord and unbidden such things as they believe will be useful and pleasing to the Lord. It is the former class whom Christ here chides and rebukes, to the end that He may lead his disciples to the higher grade.'

6 Philo (*De Vit. Cont.* § 9) tells us of the Egyptian Therapeutæ: 'Those who are to serve will enter ungirt and with flowing robes, that they may bring to this feast no appearance of slavish garb.'

7 Bengel: 'Hapless is he whom the Lord calls an unprofitable servant (Matt. xxv. 30), happy he who so calls himself.'

8 On the distinction between ἀρκετός, occurring only here and at Matt. 25:30, and ἀχρηστός, occurring only at Philemon 11, see a quotation from Tittmann in my *Synonymns of the N.T.*, p. 394. The former is more negatively, the latter more positively and actively bad. None of the Versions, from Wiclif to the latest, attempt any distinction between the words.

to the strictness of justice He *might* assume; the other, according to the riches of his grace, He *will* assume. We, to keep us humble, are evermore to acknowledge that upon that footing He might put all our service done to Him, having at the same time this assurance, that so long as we put it upon this footing, He will not; because so long, we, continuing in our humility, are capable of receiving his favours without being corrupted by them. And assuredly the experience of every heart will attest how necessary this aspect of the truth, as well as the other; how needful that in hours when we are tempted to draw back, to shun and evade our tasks, we should then feel that a necessity is laid upon us; that, indeed, while we do them willingly, we do them also the most acceptably; yet, whether willingly or not, they must be done; that we are servants, who are not to question our Master's will, but to fulfil it. Good for us it is to be reminded of this in such moments, and thus kept in the way of duty, till the time of a more joyful and childlike obedience again comes round.<sup>9</sup> When too, because we have accomplished some little work, we count that we may straightway take our ease, and regard our 'Well done' as already gained, very profitable will be then the warning of the parable, the example of the hind, who having laboured all day in the field, resumes his labours in the house, and only looks to rest and refresh himself, when his master has no further need of his service; good for us that, in the words of the Son of Sirach, we learn to 'wax old in our work' (11:20), and, so long as we are here, see in one task completed but a stepping-stone to another which shall be begun; ever as we have surmounted one hill of labour, perceiving a new one rising above it, and girding ourselves for the surmounting of that as well. Well for us, too, is it to know and to confess that we are not doing God a favour in serving Him, but He the highest favour to us in enabling us to this service; and that He, graciously accepting our work and rewarding it, does this solely out of the freedom and riches of his grace; adding to it a worth which of itself it does not possess; that there is another footing, that namely of the parable, upon which He might have put all--yea, upon which, though *He* does not, yet *we* must evermore put it, so far as this may be needful for the subduing of every motion of pride and vain-glory, every temptation to bring in God as our debtor--which we evermore are doing, or are on the point of doing.<sup>10</sup>

Effectual medicine against this disease of pride and vainglory, the words which Christ here places in the mouth of his disciples will supply;<sup>11</sup> for if, when they have '*done all,*' they shall still confess, '*We are unprofitable servants*' (cf. Job 22:2,3; 35:7,8; Ps. 16:2), how much more, and with how far deeper self-abasement and shame, when their consciences bear them witness, as the conscience of every man enlightened by the Spirit of God must

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<sup>9</sup> Guerricus (*Bernardi Opp.* vol. ii. p. 1028, ed Bened.): 'For that fear which is purified by love takes not joy away, but preserves it; it does not destroy, but builds up; it does not embitter, but seasons; the greater the modesty, the greater the lastingness; the greater the severity, the greater the truth; the greater the holiness, the greater the sweetness.'

<sup>10</sup> Ambrose (*Exp. in Luc.* viii. 32): 'Recognize that thou art a servant bound by many duties. Exalt not thyself because thou art called a son of God: thou must recognize the grace shewn thee, thou must not ignore thine own nature. Boast not thyself if thou hast served well, as it was thy duty to do. The sun is submissive, the moon obedient, angels serve. . . . Let us not, therefore, ask praise of ourselves, neither let us forestall the judgment of God, or anticipate the sentence of the judge: let us wait each his own time and his own judge.'

<sup>11</sup> Augustine: 'Struggling diligently against the plague of vaingloriousness.'

bear witness to him, that so far from having done all that was commanded, they have in innumerable things grievously failed and come short of their duty, of what they might and ought to have done.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>Cajetan: 'By the words, "When ye have done all," it is not said that they would do all, but that even if they do all things, even if they have the merits of those who do all those things that are commanded, let them still recognize themselves as unprofitable servants; so that *a fortiori* they should recognize themselves as worse than unprofitable, that is, as debtors in and guilty of many things, which they ought to have done or ought to do.'--Our Church in her 14th Article has used this parable against the Romish doctrine of works of supererogation. Cf. Gerhard, *Loc. Theoll.* loc. xviii. 8,91.