

Increase Our Faith! (Part 3)

Introduction

The Text

⁷“Will any one of you who has a servant plowing or keeping sheep say to him when he has come in from the field, ‘Come at once and recline at table’? ⁸Will he not rather say to him, ‘Prepare supper for me, and dress properly, and serve me while I eat and drink, and afterward you will eat and drink’? ⁹Does he thank the servant because he did what was commanded? ¹⁰So you also, when you have done all that you were commanded, say, ‘We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty.’” (Luke 17:7–10)

The Humility of Faith

- A. We’ve come back now for the third and final sermon I’m placing under that banner raised by the Apostles back up in [Luke 17:5](#): “Increase our faith!” I’ve seen this desperate request from them as the piece that unites and holds together the flow of thought from [v. 1](#) on down to [v. 10](#) really. It’s this issue of faith that seems to be central to the whole discussion.
- B. So, to this point, we’ve looked at:
1. The Nature of Faith—where we concluded that faith in its fullest expression is personally trusting and resting and delighting in God and His gospel.
 2. The Gift of Faith—where we concluded that faith itself is a gift of God’s regenerating grace . . . I need Jesus to believe in Jesus.
 3. The Effect of Faith (last week)—where we saw that just a mustard seed of faith in Jesus can accomplish a great deal—from the deeper more substantial miracles of love for God and neighbor to the more surface miracles of things like healing and answered prayer and so forth.
 4. So then this week, as we come to [vv. 7-10](#), we are ready to consider what I would call: The Humility of Faith.

A Logical Progression

- A. And I think the progression in logic here makes quite a bit of sense.
1. Think about it for a moment with me. If faith really is turning away from ourselves and trusting in the strength and help of Another; if faith really is a gift of grace to me from God; if faith in Jesus’ word and power really is the way we accomplish great feats in the Christian life . . . then it follows that the person of faith, the Christian, as it were, should also be a man or woman of great humility.
 - a. Because the whole thing is not about me. It’s His grace, His Spirit, His power at work in and through me. If you see anything good in my life, it’s because of Him.

B. Here is why we see it all over the Scriptures—this connection between faith and humility.

1. Consider [Eph 2:8-9](#), which we referenced back in the first sermon of this little mini-series. Paul writes this: “⁸ [B]y grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, ⁹ not a result of works, so that no one may boast.” So because this whole Christian life thing is by grace through faith and not of ourselves, boasting is excluded outright and in its place . . . humility. “I didn’t do this. I can’t do this. It’s Him!”
2. He says something similar in his letter to the Romans. Referencing the gospel and the work of Christ for us on the cross, Paul comes out in [Rom 3:27](#) and asks: “Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? By a law of works? No, but by the law of faith.” Because our salvation and ensuing sanctification is by grace through faith—no boasting! Only deep humility.
3. Or do you remember the story in [Matt 15:21-28](#) when that Gentile woman is begging Jesus for help with her daughter and Jesus, testing her, pushes back saying: “²⁴ I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel . . . ²⁶ It is not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs” (vv. 24, 26). Do you remember how she responds? I mean, our egos would be hurt. We’d want to say: “Who do you think you are calling me a dog and what not?!” But she doesn’t do anything of the sort. She replies: “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table” (v. 27). To which Jesus responds (and here’s the point): “O woman, great is your faith!” (v. 28). Great humility and great faith go together. They’re a package deal.

Severing the Connection

- A. And yet, sadly, though faith and humility ought always to be a package deal—and you truly can’t have one without the other—too often, in our flesh, we attempt to sever that connection.
1. What I mean is, we start to think that things done by faith, things truly done in the Spirit’s power, have been done simply by us. We made it happen. We start to take credit for that which is truly God’s.
- B. You see, here is another reason why the flow of logic back in [Luke 17](#) makes sense, and it’s coming this time from a bit more negative of an angle. Jesus moves from a discussion of faith and its great effect—uprooting mulberry trees and what not—to a discussion of humility and our place as unworthy servants, specifically because it is on this point and progression, I think, that we are prone to falter.
- C. This is why there are a great many warnings in the Scriptures about the danger of wandering from the faith-humility connection. The first few texts I read were more positive in their language. Here now we get a bit more ominous sense of things as we recognize the temptations we have to be proud, ironically, even in our faith.
1. In [Rom 11:20](#) Paul warns the Gentile believers of what we see go down in Israel’s story: “They were broken off because of their unbelief, but you stand fast through faith. So do not become proud, but fear.” Israel grew proud in her position as if it were something she

somehow merited or deserved . . . and she was cut off because of it. “I don’t want the same thing to happen to you! Faith and humility. Keep them together as they were meant to be.”

2. Or consider his words in [Rom 12:3](#): “For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.” And he comes out a few verses later in [v. 16](#) and writes: “Never be wise in your own sight.” It’s not you. This whole thing isn’t about you. Whatever you have is a gift. It’s been given to you be Him!
 3. Paul is, perhaps, most forceful on this point with the Corinthians, who, it seems, certainly were prone to think that their great manifestations of the Spirit and things somehow set them apart as something more special than the next. To them he writes in [1 Cor 4:7](#): “What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?”
- D. I wonder if you remember the story of Paul and Barnabas in Lystra. There’s a guy there, lame in his feet, and Paul heals him—a great miracle! And all these pagan folks seeing this, think Paul and Barnabas must be gods: “The gods have come down to us in the likeness of men!” ([Acts 14:11](#)). And they start trying to offer sacrifices to them.
1. Now, you’ve got to know the temptation: “We just did this flashy miracle. The whole city thinks we’re amazing. This feels kind of good. I always wanted to be adored, praised, respected, even worshiped.”
 - a. But they won’t go there. They knew the stuff of [Luke 17](#). When they saw all of this going down: “^{14b} . . . they tore their garments and rushed out into the crowd, crying out,^{15a} ‘Men, why are you doing these things? We also are men, of like nature with you, and we bring you good news, that you should turn from these vain things to a living God . . .’” ([vv. 14b–15a](#)).
 - i. “Don’t be mistaken. We are nobodies. But we are here to tell you about the only Somebody that matters.”
- E. They get it! But, sadly, a lot of us often don’t. And that’s why we need [Luke 17:7-10](#) to come in and course correct and keep us on track, to bring us back down to size and put us in our proper place.
1. So now, with this connection between faith and humility made clear in our minds, we are ready to proceed in our consideration of these verses bit by bit. I’m going to divide my thinking here into two headings: (1) What I Deserve; and (2) What I Receive.

(1) What I Deserve

An Ethos of Entitlement

- A. I don’t think it can be denied that we here, especially in America, love to talk about what we deserve. And, it seems to me, we have this rather inflated sense of it. We like to think we deserve quite a bit.

1. "I've put in long hours at the office, I deserve this vacation."
 2. "I've been on a strict diet for weeks, I deserve this bowl of Marianne's ice cream."
 3. "I've been watching crazy kids all day, I deserve this glass of wine and some quiet time to myself."
 4. "After all that I've done for him? I don't deserve to be treated like this!"
- B. I came across an example of this (what I'd call) "ethos of entitlement" in my Facebook newsfeed just the other day. There's a guy promoting his book on productivity and leadership, and he writes this: "Ever feel stuck doing work you should hand off? Want to make progress on your most important priorities, but tiny tasks, reminders, and work you hate doing crowd your schedule? Don't waste time trying to break through these productivity roadblocks on your own – take the easy route and get a systematic blueprint for getting the help you deserve. In my new book . . . I'll be revealing my process for finding, training, and leveraging the Executive Assistant your busy life deserves!"
1. Now, it's probably a good book. I like the author well enough. I may even buy it and try to learn a few things from him. But the fact is, you see that one of the ways he's trying to sell this to us is by pandering to our sense of entitlement.
 - a. According to him, I deserve, you deserve, an "executive assistant"! I like the sound of that. He makes good point. I am important. I think I do deserve such a thing. Maybe I should get that book and get that assistant.
 - i. It sounds nice, but it has no basis in reality.
- C. Now, to be clear, I'm not saying there's no sense of justice or equity in the horizontal dimension in our relationships and social engagements. I recognize we need to stand up for the oppressed and things, and, in one sense, we can say they don't deserve that, and those guys do deserve this for taking advantage of them or whatever.
1. I'm just saying, when we broaden this conversation out to include God, and we start talking to him with this attitude of entitlement about what we deserve, well it doesn't ever end well for us.
 - a. "What do you deserve? Do you really want to have this conversation with Me? Do you really want to know? An executive assistant? A vacation? A bowl of ice cream? How about hell. How about judgment. How about: 'The wages of sin [aka what your sin deserves] is death' (Rom 6:23)."
- D. Now, putting something like that in your little promo ads isn't going to sell you a lot of books. But it is the truth. And this is the sort of thing Jesus is aiming at now in our text full force.
1. We do some good stuff for God, we do some mighty deeds by faith, some mulberry tree miracles, we forgive and love others, we serve in the church, we read our Bibles regularly, whatever it may be—and we expect, indeed we feel we deserve, some appreciation, some recognition, someone to serve us a bit, someone to praise us. We forget our place in the story, in the cosmos. And Jesus, seeing where all this is going, is attempting to get us back in order.

2 Questions (vv. 7-9)

- A. So He tells a quasi-parable in vv. 7-9, where in it He refers to what was common practice in his day in relational dealings between masters and their servants. And with these three verses here, at bottom I think He's really trying to get His disciples and us to consider two somewhat stinging questions:

Question #1: Does the Servant Deserve His Master's Service?

- A. Look at v. 7 again: "Will any one of you who has a servant plowing or keeping sheep say to him when he has come in from the field, 'Come at once and recline at table?'" So here you have a servant faithfully working in the field—whether tending to the soil or tending to the sheep—and it's been a long day. He's tired. We would say he deserves some rest.

1. But Jesus goes on to answer His own question here in the verse that follows: "Will he not rather say to him, 'Prepare supper for me, and dress properly, and serve me while I eat and drink, and afterward you will eat and drink?'" (v. 8).

- B. In our culture of labor unions and what not would say that isn't fair! It isn't right. We should get a fifteen minute break every couple hours. And if we work over eight hours in a day we should get overtime pay. In America those servants would be out lobbying or going on strike.

1. But it was not so in Jesus' day. The disciples knew the answer to Jesus' question. The servant would not come in from the field and expect the master to serve him a meal. O no, serving his master food would also be part of his job. And only after the master has eaten will the servant eat, and, even then, they certainly would not be reclining at table together.

- a. Craig Keener, in his Bible background commentary, notes that it was not "considered honorable for masters to eat with their slaves, and it was virtually never done."

- C. Does the Servant Deserve His Master's Service? No.

Question #2: Does the Servant Deserve His Master's Praise?

- A. For this, look now at v. 9. Jesus goes on to ask: "Does he [the master] thank the servant because he did what was commanded?"

1. This time Jesus doesn't signal towards the right answer, but He doesn't have to. It would've been clear to His disciples. The answer is no. The servant has just done his job. He has not earned some praise or gratitude from the master. He has only done what was expected.

- B. If you have kids, you've probably come across the same sort of thing Jesus is getting at here when, after fulfilling some chore or normal household duty they inevitably come to us with their hands open looking for the reward. I just made my bed can I get my marbles? Can I get my money? Can I get my sticker?

1. Now, we do try to reinforce good behavior with reward and things, but there is still something that feels off about the person who does the good simply to get back something for him/herself. We want them to do just because we are a family and it is right to love and serve, it is your duty, your obligation. There should not always be a pat on the back because you picked your clothes up off the floor. If there were no pat on the back would you still do it because it shows courtesy and care for your things and the people you live with? We want kids that would.
 - a. And Jesus is getting at the same sort of thing with His own kids. He wants us to serve and work for Him not just because it gets us some payoff, but because it is what we've been created and called by God to do. And that is enough.

A Humble Self-Understanding (v. 10)

- A. Now the point of this parable is to move the disciples and us towards that confession that comes out there in v. 10. Here is where Jesus moves from this metaphor to its meaning: “So you also [there’s the link], when you have done all that you were commanded, say, ‘We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty.’”
- B. Regardless of whatever work we do for God, whatever feats of faith we accomplish, whatever obedience we render, He wants us to have this humble self-understanding. I am an “unworthy servant.” Let’s take that one piece at a time.

(1) “I Am a Servant”

- A. The idea here is that we belong to God. And when we consider the full unfolding of biblical revelation we actually come to see that we belong to Him, that we are owned by Him in a twofold sense. By this I mean that we belong to Him not only in the sense that we have been created by Him but also, if we are in fact followers of Christ, we belong to Him because we’ve been redeemed by Him.
 1. So Paul writes to the Corinthians: “^{19b}You are not your own,^{20a} for you were bought with a price” (1 Cor 6:19b–20a). What price? “[T]he precious blood of Christ” (1 Pet 1:19). That’s what it cost Him to redeem you. Therefore, you belong to Him.
 2. Paul fills this out in Rom 14:7-9: “⁷ For none of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself.⁸ For if we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s.⁹ For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living.”
- B. Now, I wonder, how do these texts land on you? Do they not confront headlong the spirit of this modern age—especially in the west where we prize individualism and the self-made man? “You don’t own me. I own me. You don’t tell me what to do. I am the captain of my own soul.” Well, here Jesus, speaking with all the authority of God, says: “No, you’re not!”
 1. And with that He rips us from our world of self-aggrandized delusion, and he locates us back in the biblical world, the true world, where God has made us and redeemed us, and we

belong to Him. And we owe all to him. And we serve not to get paid, not to barter some deal, but simply by virtue of the fact that He is God and we are His.

(2) “I Am Unworthy”

- A. But there is more to be said. Conceiving of ourselves as servants would be humbling enough. But there is an adjective there. We are not merely servants, we are “unworthy” servants.
- B. The Greek word for “unworthy” here is difficult “but it seems to mean ‘not yielding gain’ (cf. its use of the man who hid his talent, Matt. 25:30). [The idea, then, is that] our best service does not bring gain to God and give us a claim on him” (TNTC). We can’t add anything to Him. And we certainly can’t put Him in our debt. We are unprofitable, unworthy servants.
 - 1. I thought of what Paul writes in Rom 11:35-36: “³⁵ [W]ho has given a gift to [God] that he might be repaid? ³⁶ For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen”
- C. We like to imagine ourselves indispensable to the Father’s cause, as if He couldn’t quite accomplish His plans with out us. But it is very much the opposite. As Jesus says in John 15:5: “[A]part from me you can do nothing.” It is certainly not: “Apart from you I can do nothing.” But rather: “Apart from me you can do nothing.”
- D. Whenever a saint forgets this very thing and puts Himself in the place of indispensability, he is readying himself to be disposed of.
 - 1. When Moses thinks himself to be one of the only faithful ones left in Israel and he can’t take the stubbornness of the people he’s called to lead, when he strikes the rock in anger in the wilderness instead of merely speaking to it as the Lord commanded, Moses is put up on the shelf. He is done being useful, in particular, because he thought himself so useful, it seems to me.
 - 2. Or we could say the same sort of thing about Elijah. Do you remember when he is running for his life from Jezebel and he’s frustrated. He cries out to the Lord: “I have been very jealous for the Lord, the God of hosts. For the people of Israel have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword, and I, even I only, am left” (1 Kings 19:10). And God says, “Really? Elijah? You’re the only faithful one, huh? I have seven thousand in Israel who have not bowed their knee to Baal.” And from then on, Elijah’s done. It’s time for Elisha.
 - a. The moment a believer thinks himself to be worthy, to be of much profit, to be somehow indispensable to God, is the moment he renders himself more of a liability. The moment the clay hardens against the potter, it is of no use to him. But so long as the clay remains soft and malleable, humble and lowly, well God can shape that in many beautiful ways!
- E. The goal, I suppose would be to stay in the place Paul the Apostle appears to have been. When looking at his ministry, at what he’s called to do in bringing the gospel to the lost, his gut reaction isn’t: “Well, God must really need me—my intellect, my righteousness, my eloquence” . . . and so

forth. No it's to cry out: "Who is sufficient for these things?" (2 Cor 2:16). The answer he expects, of course, is "No one!" But he goes on later to clarify what he means by this: " ⁴Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God. ⁵Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God . . ." (2 Cor 3:4-5).

1. And this leads us really to the second piece I want to consider with you now for a brief moment as we begin to draw things to a close: namely, What I Receive.

(2) What I Receive

This Isn't the Jesus I Know?!

- A. Perhaps, as we've been going through this, you found yourself thinking: "Wait a minute. Some of the things in this text, it doesn't sound like the Jesus I know. I thought Jesus does welcome to the table and serve and commend and reward and all these others things."
- B. And if that's what you were feeling, your intuition here is correct. There is more to the story than what is right in front of us in this text. You see, if we read the gospels carefully, what we find is that all of these things Jesus here says a Master would never do for His servants are precisely the things He Himself is busy doing for us.
 1. In [Luke 17:7](#) Jesus says a master would never be seen reclining at table with his servants. But all over the gospels we see Him doing this very thing. Over and over again.
 - a. With Levi the tax collector in [Luke 5](#); or that sinful woman, probably a prostitute, in [Luke 7](#); or the 5000 in [Luke 9](#); or the tax collectors and sinners in [Luke 15](#); or Zacchaeus in [Luke 19](#); or the Last Supper in [Luke 22](#); and on we could go. And, of course, we know all of this is a picture of the great banquet He is preparing for us that we shall partake of with Him at the end of the age.
 2. In [Luke 17:8](#) Jesus says that a master would never gird himself and serve His own servants. But, in countless texts in the gospels, we read of Him doing just this:
 - a. Speaking of the Messianic Banquet in [Luke 12:37](#) He says: "Blessed are those servants whom the master finds awake when he comes. Truly, I say to you, he will dress himself for service and have them recline at table, and he will come and serve them."
 - b. In [John 13:4-5](#) we read: " ⁴[Jesus] rose from supper. He laid aside his outer garments, and taking a towel, tied it around his waist. ⁵Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet . . ."
 - c. In [Luke 22:27](#) He says to His disciples: "[W]ho is the greater, one who reclines at table or one who serves? Is it not the one who reclines at table? But I am among you as the one who serves."

- d. And He fills this out further for us in [Mark 10:45](#): “For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” This Master takes common convention and flips it on its head. This master becomes the servant.
- 3. In [Luke 17:9](#) Jesus says that a master would never thank a servant for simply doing what was commanded.
 - a. But in [1 Cor 4:5](#) we read that “each one will receive his commendation from God [Gk. epainos = praise!]”
 - b. And, in [Matt 25:21](#) Jesus speaks of faithful servants hearing on the last day from God’s own mouth: “Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master.”

So Why All This Talk?

- A. So why all this talk about us being unworthy servants, not deserving His company, nor His service, nor His thanks, if He plans to give it to us anyways. What’s He trying to accomplish here?
 - 1. Well, I think it’s actually quite simple: He never wants us to lose sight of what we truly deserve so that we are always in awe of what we actually receive. “How can it be?!”
- B. I saw a statistic recently that said: “70% of wealthy families lose their wealth by the second generation, and a stunning 90% by the third.” And the question, of course, is why?
 - 1. I think most of us understand how this could happen. These kids are a step removed from the hard-work required by their parents to earn all that they now enjoy. And they start thinking this is how life works and they deserve it. The entitlement thing sets in. Everybody has a maid that cleans up after them and a butler that brings them caviar when they ring a bell or snap their fingers or whatever. And they just get crusty and arrogant and things.
- C. And this can happen in the church.
 - 1. Perhaps you started in awe that Jesus would save you and include you in this that He’s changing you and doing marvelous things through you. But then, subtly, over time, as people start to admire or praise you, or whatever, you start to take credit for some of this. You start to plagiarize, as it were, the Spirit’s work in your life. You sever the connection between faith and humility.
 - a. And you grow proud and crusty, judgmental, and generally unamazed at the love that God has shown you. “Of course He would show you that. You are worthy of it.” And, just then, you’re on the brink of losing it.
- D. That’s why Jesus is saying this here. That’s why it’s so important. So that you keep your awe and your joy and wonder at the gospel. And more than that, that it would just grow deeper and richer with time.

1. Until one day you stand before Him and He calls you to that banquet table, and you're not looking for a red carpet to be rolled out—"Nick's here, get your cameras out"—no! You can't believe the unworthy, sin-broken servant, gets to sit at the Master's table.
 - a. In Christ I'm welcome here, but let's be real, I have no business being here. What I deserve and what I receive are worlds apart. And the space in the middle is where awe and worship and joy can grow.