

DOING YOUR DUTY

October 6, 2013

Luke 17:5-10

This is another text that is difficult to understand. The disciples ask Jesus to increase their faith, and he says if you had faith the size of a mustard seed you would be able with words simply to tell a tree to be uprooted and throw itself in the sea. Literally? No. An exaggeration for emphasis.

Then Jesus speaks about a servant doing his duty because that's what he is to do, without seeking praise or glory.

He tells the disciples they must do their duty, but not to look for rewards, because they are doing what is expected of them, no more or no less.

It seems to me this passage is saying that our duty is to live by faith in Jesus, and we perform that duty each day, but we are not to expect praise or glory from God for that living, because that living is what is expected of us who have been saved through Christ.

As I said, this is another of Jesus' difficult teachings. How do we unravel these words so they make some sense to us this morning?

I would like to start by sharing with you a poem written by Edgar Guest as found in the book "Doing the Gospel" by James Bjorge.

Keep these words in mind this morning, because they are, in a nutshell, a key to understanding what Jesus is saying in this gospel passage..

"I'd rather see a witness than hear one any day.
I'd rather one should walk with me than merely tell the way.
The eye's a better pupil and more willing than the ear.
Fine talking is confusing but example's always clear.
And the best of all the "witnesses" are those who live their creeds.
For, to see good put into action is what everybody needs.
I soon can learn to do it if you'll let me see it done.
I can watch your hands in action, but your tongue too fast may run.
And the lecture you deliver may be very wise and true,
But I'd rather get my lessons by observing what you do.
For I might misunderstand you and the high advice you give.
But there's no misunderstanding how you act and how you live.
When I see a deed of kindness, I am eager to be kind.
When a weaker person stumbles and a strong one stays behind.
Just to see if he can help him, then the wish grows strong in me
To become as big and thoughtful as I know that friend to be

And all travelers can witness that the best of guides today,
Is not the one who tells them but the one who shows the way.
Many people speak; but folks believe what they behold.
One deed of kindness noticed is worth forty that are told.
Who stands with men of honor learns to hold his honor dear,
For right living speaks a language which to everyone is clear.
Though one may be a charmer with his eloquence, I say
I'd rather see a witness than to hear one, any day."

To put what this author is saying into common language of today, a Christian must not just talk the talk, but must also walk the walk.

That is what Jesus is saying when he speaks about duty. We have a duty to be faithful to him in our daily life, not just speaking about Christ, but living him in our individual worlds.

How faith is applied in service to others is what Jesus is talking about. A servant's task is never done, as Jesus explains. The servant comes in from a full day's work in the field not to eat right away, but to serve the master's meal.

If the servant thinks that he has a compliment coming for this work, he is mistaken. He is doing what is expected of him.

If the disciples wanted to ask for an increase of anything, it should not have been faith, but the energy to apply the faith in ongoing, never-ending service.

We're talking real-world, practical faith. Faith that actually helps us function in the marketplace, the home, the school, the job — even when everything is falling apart.

That faith is simply in Jesus, who he is and what he has done for us. The efficacy of faith is not in how great it is but that it is in the right thing, or in our case the right one..

One writer expresses the meaning of this parable very succinctly: "...that regardless of how much we do, we cannot do more than is expected of us."

He continues "Nevertheless, God owes us nothing for living good, Christian, lives. God's favor and blessing are matters of grace -- they cannot be earned. Therefore, when we assume that we can deal with God on the basis of what God owes us, we have made a basic mistake. We have rejected grace as the basis of our relationship to God and based that relationship on our own worth and merit. Grace, by definition, is a free gift."

When we live in grace, we already have salvation, we cannot expect anything more. So living in ones duty to God does not get us praise or commendation from God because we are only doing what is expected.

Our duty is to live for Christ and to serve him by serving others.

And that brings us to the point Jesus makes in this text as he speaks about the servant dutifully doing his job without looking for reward or praise.

Jesus is saying that kingdom people are expected to serve others, to worship God, to fulfill the two great commandments he gave in the New Testament .

We are to love the Lord our God with all our heart with all our mind with all our strength and with all our soul and to love our neighbor as ourselves. That is expected. It has nothing what so ever to do with our salvation. That is a God-given gift.

This is our expected response. God acts, we respond. This response is what that poem by Mr. Guest was all about.

This response is possible by a strong and vibrant faith life. This response is what Martin Luther called sanctification or our being made holy, or, growing spiritually.

Life in Christ is not static, it's dynamic. It must be alive and changing, growing and maturing. Salvation is assured, but how we live with that assurance of salvation is the challenging and growing part our Christian journey. .

Maybe the following will help us understand how faith is to be lived. I love to deep-sea fish, but I also love coming back in after a day on the water.

I've never had a desire to try making a living as a deep-sea fisherman. It takes a lot of faith to stay at sea for a month, fishing for one's livelihood under a carpet of water, not seeing where the catch is but going after it anyway!

In her bestseller, *The Hungry Ocean*, Linda Greenlaw describes the character of the best crew mates: "The most valuable men aboard a fishing boat are those who can successfully wear the blinders, who can see the light at the end of the tunnel, no matter how dim, and who can be most imaginative when dealing with the obstacles that threaten to pull the shade."

She tells about how a crew member pulled his own tooth with needle-nose pliers rather than have the boat travel 600 miles to the nearest dentist and lose their position in the fishing fields.

Another fisherman filed his two front teeth off smooth after being hit in the mouth with a piece of gear and then continued fishing as if it had not happened.

This is a rather salty, graphic way of talking about what Jesus means regarding mustard seed faith and a dogged attitude about simply doing one's work.

Justification, salvation is God's work alone, but sanctification, living and growing in God's love is a joint effort between you and God's Spirit, the Holy Spirit. Paul says very clearly in Romans that the Holy Spirit works with our spirit so that we might cry Abba Father, Or Daddy God.

And this process happens to kingdom people, people who have felt the saving act of God through Christ and are now living out their response to that great gift of salvation.

Acts 4:13 says that when people "saw the boldness Peter and John, realizing they were normal, common, men, they were amazed, And suddenly, they recognized that they had been with Jesus."

Or as Paul says in Ephesians 4:15," Instead, by speaking the truth in a spirit of love, we must grow up in every way to Christ who is the head."

We are called as kingdom people to set an example, not for reward, not for praise, but because it is our duty, it is our response to God's saving grace in our lives.

And as we live in this response to God's grace, we have a peace that lets us act, lets us live out our faith. Christ died once for all. Salvation is assured, but living is an ongoing process.

A young man applied for a job as a farmhand. When the farmer asked for his qualifications, he said, "I can sleep when the wind blows." This puzzled the farmer. But he liked the young man, and hired him.

A few days later, the farmer and his wife were awakened in the night by a violent storm. They quickly began to check things out to see if all was secure.

They found that the shutters of the farmhouse had been securely fastened. A good supply of logs had been set next to the fireplace. The young man slept soundly.

The farmer and his wife then inspected their property. They found that the farm tools had been placed in the storage shed, safe from the elements. The tractor had been moved into the garage. The barn was properly locked. Even the animals were calm. All was well.

The farmer then understood the meaning of the young man's words, "I can sleep when the wind blows."

Because the farmhand did his work loyally and faithfully when the skies were clear, he was prepared for the storm when it broke. So when the wind blew, he was not afraid. He could sleep in peace.

This story about the young farmhand illustrates a principle that is often overlooked about being prepared for various events that occur in life.

There was nothing dramatic or sensational in the young farmhand's preparations -- he just faithfully did what was needed each day. Consequently, peace was his, even in a storm.

We can see, I think, how this applies to our lives. A short poem expresses it very well:

“It isn't the things you do, It's the things you leave undone,
Which gives you a bit of heartache at the setting of the sun.”

What are you leaving undone?

For example, you are responsible for doing and saying things that foster positive relationships with relatives, friends and co-workers. Are you doing what is necessary to cultivate solid relationships with others that can withstand "storms" and other events that arise?

We can sleep when the wind blows if we are performing our duty. We don't have to earn our salvation. We can't earn our salvation – that is God's gift.

But as we live, we are called to live for Christ, and our neighbor. Not for reward, not for praise, not for gain, but because it is expected of us.

Remember verse 10 of our scripture lesson: “In the same way, “ Jesus said, when you obey me you should say, 'We are unworthy servants who have simply done our duty.'”

Have you done your duty??

It is said of Leonardo da Vinci that in his boyhood, when he saw caged birds exposed for sale on the streets of Florence, he would buy them and set them free. That was a rare trait in a young boy, and it showed a noble heart full of genuine sympathy.

As we go about our lives, we find many caged birds, people that we may set free, imprisoned joys that we may liberate, by the power that is in us of helping others.

Naturalists say that the stork, having fed its young, will sail under them when they first attempt to fly, and, if they begin to fall, will lift them up and support them and that, if one stork is wounded by a sportsman, the others gather about it, put their wings under it, and try to carry it away.

These birds teach us the lesson of helpfulness. We should come close to those who are overburdened or weak or faint, wounded by sorrow of circumstance, it is our duty to gather about that person, and try to help and sustain as we are able.

There is scarcely a limit to our possibilities of helpfulness in these ways. Guest says: "I'd rather see a witness than hear one any day:"

"In the same way, " Jesus said, when you obey me you should say, 'We are unworthy servants who have simply done our duty.'"

Have you done your duty??