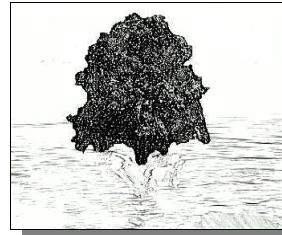


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*The Parable of the Unprofitable Servant
Luke 17:5-10*

Message by Pastor Eric Chang

Today we study in the Lord Jesus' teaching in Luke 17:5-10. A very important passage! We are studying the parables in the Gospel of Luke, and this parable, sometimes called the Parable of the Unprofitable Servant, actually starts from v7 to v10, but we cannot omit the previous two verses because the parable in fact is an explanation of those two verses. This is what we read in Luke 17:5-10.

The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!" And the Lord said...

I would like you especially to notice the word 'Lord'. In my last message, we saw that the central theme of the Lord Jesus' teaching is the Kingship of God. Jesus is Lord, not just Savior. He is here constantly addressed as Lord. Of course he is our Savior. There is no question that he is a Savior; but he is only Savior of those who

acknowledge him as Lord.

"If you had faith as a grain of mustard seed, you could say to this sycamore tree, 'Be rooted up, and be planted in the sea and it would obey you.' 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 sit down at table'? Will he not rather say to him, 'Prepare supper for me and gird yourself and serve me, till I eat and drink; and afterward you shall eat and drink'? Does he thank the servant because he did what was commanded? So you also when you have done all that is commanded you, say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty.'"

Now what is the Lord Jesus teaching us here? Let us return to v5 and we find that he is speaking to the apostles. For the most part he has been speaking to his disciples and now he is speaking specifically to the apostles, the twelve. It is these apostles — if you think of apostles as some kind of an elite group, a special group, a higher, exceptional and unusual group than the disciples — they are speaking for us with this request, "Increase our faith."

In answer to this request, the Lord Jesus declares the importance of having faith and what faith can do. Well, surely the apostles were quite aware of this already. That's why they asked for the increase of faith. If faith were unimportant, there would be no point to ask for an increase of it. They are already aware of the importance of the increase of faith. But the Lord Jesus drives the point further and he goes on to tell this parable. Well, what is the connection of the parable? What, in fact, is the Lord's answer to that request to increase faith? That is exactly what we need to study.

Increase Our Faith! But Do You Have Faith?

So let us look at those words, first of all, "*Increase our faith*". Now, of course, if you have not got any faith, there is nothing to increase. If you had no money in the bank, you cannot ask for an increase of the money in the bank by interest or by what other means. You cannot increase a zero. There you would have had to add something to it. Now, if they had no faith, they do not ask for an increase of faith. They would say, "Give us faith. We haven't got faith." You can only ask for an increase of faith when you have some faith to increase. You cannot grow if there is nothing to grow. There must first be a plant that can grow. So, one speaks of growth only when there is life in the first place. Where there is no life, there cannot be growth. So, it is already understood that the apostles do have faith, and they are asking for an increase of that faith. Now that's important to understand. It's not that

the apostles are confessing that they do not have any faith; they are confessing that their faith is not great enough, it is not big enough.

What then is the Lord Jesus' answer? "*If you had faith as a grain of mustard seed...*" Does he mean to say they have not got faith even as a grain of mustard seed? But they have already concluded that they do have some faith. The Lord Jesus said, "*If you had faith*", a hypothetical statement, a hypothetical 'if', that is, assuming, that they do not have that kind of faith — "*faith as a grain of mustard seed*". Now this is very puzzling. Can it be that a person can be an apostle who has not got faith so much as a grain of mustard seed?

Now you know that a grain of mustard seed is regarded as the smallest seed known to the farmer in Palestine. It is not the smallest seed in the world, but it is the smallest seed known to the Palestinian farmer. Some of you may know that the poppy seed is still smaller than the mustard seed. But that of course is not the point because they did not grow poppies in Palestine. The point here is that it is the smallest seed known to the Palestinian farmer. If you have seen the mustard seed, you will have to agree that it is an exceedingly small seed. It is pretty hard as it is to see. It is a very small seed. Can it be that the apostles have not got even faith as a grain of mustard seed? Not even as small as that?

If you think in those terms, of course, you have really missed the point of the Lord Jesus' teaching. A mustard seed may be very small but it is very complete. The point is not its size but its completeness. And so, if you are thinking in terms of size, of course faith is not judged in terms of quantity or size. It is judged in terms of its quality. There is no point having a very large size of something that is as dead as stone. What would have been the use to say you have faith as big as the rock of Gibraltar? Well, a rock is as dead as anything. That will never increase. You cannot increase the rock of Gibraltar because what is dead does not increase. They spoke about increase and the Lord Jesus acknowledges that only that which has life in it can increase. A seed has life. But can it be that the apostles have not got life? Oh no. That's not the point. What he is saying is that they have faith — he acknowledges they have faith — but their faith is incomplete.

Faith of a Mustard Seed — Tiny yet Perfect!

A seed may be very small but it is perfect. Have you ever noticed that a seed is perfect? If it were not perfect, it would not grow. And so, you can see how perfectly the Lord Jesus is answering their question: "Your faith is lacking in completeness. It is lacking perfection. You want to increase your faith? The only way to do that is, first of all, to have a faith which, though small, is perfect. Your faith may be small,

but if it is imperfect you cannot increase. You have asked me to increase your faith. But it will increase if that faith is complete, perfect.” Now the mustard seed is very small. You can look at it through a magnifying glass and you will notice that it is perfect. It is small but it lacks nothing. Now if your faith is to increase, it must be a perfect faith. That which is imperfect cannot increase.

Take, for example, a child. A child is going to increase in stature. The very same Greek word, “to increase the stature”, is used by the Lord Jesus in another place: “Will you by being anxious increase your stature by one cubit or by any size at all?” [Mt 6:27] Worry does not result in an increase of stature; it does not increase anything. So, if you are going to increase that stature like a little child that child has to be perfect in the first place. If, for example, there were some malfunction in its system, if there were some serious disease in it, or if some part of its constitution were missing, it will not grow. You know that there are some children who lack a growth hormone. They are born into the world and they are deficient in some gland, in some hormone. They cannot grow. Today they are trying to provide these children with certain drugs that will supply the lack of that hormone of growth which they need. Once they have that hormone, they can grow again. So only that which is complete, lacking nothing, will be able to grow. In fact this is the principle of life.

And so he says, “If your faith were like a grain of mustard seed — as complete as that, maybe that small in size but not small in quality, perfect in its quality — you would be able to say to this sycamore tree...” More correctly, it is the mulberry tree. In fact, if you research into it, you will find that what is talked about is a mulberry tree. Sycamore is perhaps the name for the white mulberry tree. There is a black mulberry tree and there is a white mulberry tree. I think we, as Chinese, know what a mulberry tree is. In Chinese, we called it a “sāngshù” [桑树]. I used to pluck the leaves of the mulberry tree because I used to grow silk worms. You know that silk worms eat the leaves of the mulberry tree. It is so nice to keep silkworms and to watch them go into a cocoon and come out as a moth or a butterfly.

So, we know what a mulberry tree is. A mulberry tree tends to be very big and grows to a great size, with very strong, powerful roots. “And you will say to this great tree, ‘Be removed from here and be planted in the sea’” — not thrown into the sea. Notice very carefully the words “*be planted in the sea*”. Since when can a tree be planted in the sea? You plant it on dry ground. Have you ever heard of planting a tree in the sea? Of course, the Lord Jesus is saying something that is very remarkable. A tree is going to — by your word of command, if you have faith — move from the dry land and be planted — not fall — into the sea. In Canada, we

often see in the river, say, in the St. Lawrence, whole trees floating down sometimes. They are all just lying sideways and sometimes the leaves are still green. That would be just being swept away by the water. That is not planting it. It is just being carried away by the water; it is not planted. The word used here is the word which implies growth. "You asked about increasing your faith. Well, I am telling you about, about life, about growth."

Planting a Tree in the Sea?

But then we ask the next question: What is the point of planting a tree in the sea? Now, I should also explain to you that the word 'sea' in the Gospels particularly refers to a lake. For example, you constantly read of the Sea of Galilee. It is most frequently used. So, he is not talking about the ocean. For the sake of accuracy, we just need to remember that the sea here refers to the lake, so salt water is not necessarily in question.

But we ask the question then: What is the point? What conceivable purpose is there in planting a tree in the sea? Is this going to be a demonstration of magic powers or a demonstration of power for the sake of power? Now if anyone had that kind of power, the Lord Jesus certainly had. But have you read anywhere in his miracles that he planted a tree in the sea? Or that he pushed the mountain into the sea? What conceivable purpose, what use would it be to do that? It seems to be an exercise in futility; it seems utterly useless. Can you conceive of any circumstance in which you have to say, "Okay, move this tree into the sea and let it grow in the sea."? What is the point of this?

Here, always remember that when the Lord Jesus speaks, he is speaking spiritually. It is not to say that it is impossible for a servant of God to move a tree into the sea if there should be any conceivable use. It might be one day you will have to give a sign as a prophet of God, and that might be used as a sign. But normally speaking, such a thing need not be done. There is a much more wonderful meaning in it than that. So, what is the spiritual meaning of this? Oh yes, when you are familiar with the parabolic language of the Bible — because we are dealing here with parables — then you begin to understand what the Lord Jesus is saying.

The tree in the Bible is a commonplace picture for people. People are often compared to trees, take for example Judg 9:7-15 or Ps 1:3, the well known psalm that the righteous is like a tree planted by living waters; or Isa 56:3 or Lk 23:31. All this kind of verses shows you that people are often pictured in terms of trees. If there is a great multitude of people then the picture might be that of a forest. If there are few people or one person only, then he is spoken of simply as trees or a tree. Now that

is very important. So the Lord Jesus is speaking about people. And you remember that putting down the roots, in the Parable of the Sower in Matthew Chapter 13, means to be able to get a grip of something, to go deep into something. And so, there is this kind of picture language. Also, Jude compares the ungodly men to fruitless trees that are plucked up. They are uprooted, twice dead. (Jude 1:12) So, the picture of a person compared to a tree is very common in the Bible. That point we have to understand.

Transplantation of a Tree — a Picture of Salvation

Now what happens here? Here we are talking about the transplantation of a tree from the ground in which it normally grows to a place where it does not normally live. That is very important to understand. You see, what happens to you when you are saved? What happens to you when you become a Christian, a genuine Christian? What happens? It is the result of transplantation. “You are transferred,” as Paul says in Colossians Chapter 1, “into the Kingdom of his beloved Son.” [v13] You are “transferred from darkness into his marvelous light.” [1Pe 2:9] You see, transplantation or transfer is the picture of salvation in the Bible. If you have not been transferred, if you have not been transplanted, you are not saved. But any person, who has been saved, by acknowledging Jesus as Lord and Savior, is one who is transferred from darkness into God’s marvelous light. Now, this picture is beautiful. It is just wonderful!

What we see here is this. Just like the roots of a tree take hold of the mud and the soil, so also the natural man takes hold of this world. He clutches onto this world, like the roots, he holds to this world. But when you become a Christian, you are uprooted and transplanted into a new environment which is not natural to you, which Paul says in Romans is “contrary to nature”. [Rom 11:24] We are transplanted into a new situation, like a wild olive tree into a tame olive tree, a cultivated olive tree, and this transfer is contrary to nature. Being saved is contrary to nature. You are transplanted out of the ground in which you are familiar, that is, the life in this world, into a new kind of life, in the Kingdom of God. Of course, you find the life in the Kingdom of God unfamiliar to you. It is a spiritual world. You now enter into God’s marvelous light. All your life you have lived in darkness. That was your familiar place. You know darkness, but you did not know what light is. You are transferred into his marvelous light.

In the Bible, water is often a picture of spiritual life, as you know. “Those who thirst come to me, and drink,” the Lord Jesus says. [Jn 7:37] It is the picture of water! But dryness, barrenness, desert land is a picture of death. Where there is water, there is life. The Lake of Galilee — as we saw that this word here translated ‘sea’ is

the word that is used, as in the Sea of Galilee, most frequently in the NT — is a very fertile, very rich place which is teeming with life. All kinds of fish live in there, unlike the Dead Sea which is dead. No fish can grow in the Dead Sea because of the heavy mineral content of that sea. But the Sea of Galilee is a living place. Here the picture is of water.

But there is more to it than that. We read of ‘the sea’ in front of the temple in 1Kin 7:23-26, 38-39 & 1Chr 18:8. In fact that is the laver, the place which is for cleansing, that big tub outside the front of the Temple was also called ‘the sea’. And that sea was the place of cleansing. That is where the priests washed themselves and washed the utensils that were used in the sacrifices. So, ‘the sea’ became the symbol of cleansing as well as of life. Very remarkably also in Rev 4:6, we read that in front of the throne of God there is a sea which looks like crystal, so pure and transparent it is, emphasizing the purity of that sea of cleansing in front of the throne of God. [The apostle John] does not say he saw a crystal sea, but a sea that looks like crystal because he does not know how else to describe it in its purity, in its perfection.

Faith is Accomplished by the Power of the Word

So what we then notice is this: The Lord Jesus says, “If you had faith, you would be able to say ... and it would happen.” Now notice how it is accomplished. It is accomplished by a word. It is not that you, because you had faith, will suddenly become as strong as Samson and you will grab hold of this tree and pull it out by the roots and then dump it in the sea and say, “Stand here!” And it stands there. No! No! You don’t even move. It is your word that does it. “You will say to this tree” Ah, that is perfect! It is the word that is with power. It is wonderful.

You know there are two kinds of preachers, there is a kind of preacher that talks but nothing ever happens and there is another kind of preacher that speaks and things begin to happen. What is the difference? Is it because one preacher is better than the other preacher? Is it because he has done more lay preacher training than the others? Is it that he has gone to a Bible school and spent more time in a homiletic class? Oh no! It has nothing to do with that! There are eloquent preachers, fine preachers through whom nothing ever happens and there comes this humble man who cannot preach very well, who stumbles over his words, and when he speaks, all kinds of things begin to happen. As I shared with you, when Wesley preached, he preached sometimes with such lack of expression as he would take up his message and just read it. Yet when he spoke forth his message, even by just reading it from a piece of paper, people fell on their knees and wept before God. That is power – the power of the Word of God!

Now, you see that is the important thing. He says, “If you had faith like this grain of mustard seed, complete, perfect, like the seed, with the life of God in it and no part of it missing, you would say ... and it would obey you.” Why? Is it because you have become a magician? Oh no, no. It is because God’s power is going to work through you. It is God’s power that accomplishes his purpose. When you are living in this fellowship with him, in this perfect relationship with him that is called faith, then when you speak forth the Word of God, things begin to happen. People begin to be changed. People are born again. People are transferred from darkness into his marvelous light, from the kingdom of this world into the Kingdom of his beloved Son. That is wonderful.

If you are going to preach at all, what is the use of preaching without power? And you will not collect power by going to a Bible school. You will not get power by sitting in a seminary. Mark my words! I have been through all of that and I did not come out of there with power because I have been to a seminary. Well, strictly speaking, I did not go to a seminary; I went to the Faculty of Divinity in a university, but those are the same sort of things. You do not get power from this kind of situation. Where do you get power? From God! How do you get power from God? It is by having faith like a grain of mustard seed.

Oh, how we desire this power! That when we speak forth the Word of God, that Word of God will accomplish its purpose! It will be obeyed. People will be transferred into the new life, out of the kingdom of darkness and into the Kingdom of his dear Son.

Kingdom of God and Faith

You see, the Kingdom of God itself in Lk 13:19 is compared to a grain of mustard seed. Now that is very important to remember. So, two things are compared to a grain of mustard seed in the Gospel of Luke: (1) the Kingdom of God is compared to a grain of mustard seed in Lk 13:19; and (2) faith [here in Lk 17:6]. So, this shows that there is a parallel between the Kingdom of God and faith.

Now you see, what is the Kingdom of God? I mentioned in my last message: the Kingdom of God is the kingship of God, his sovereignty in our lives. That is the kingship of God. And what is faith? Faith is the complete and total response to his kingship, to his sovereignty. That is faith. No wonder they are two aspects of the same thing. The kingship of God is meaningless in our lives unless we respond to it in total commitment. Notice this word ‘total’; unless your commitment is total, it is not perfect. If it is not perfect then it means something is missing. If something is missing, it cannot increase, as we saw at the beginning. It is lacking in power. Now

do you understand what it means?

No wonder then that same seed, the mustard seed, can represent both the lordship of Christ and our total commitment to him, because these are two parts of the same thing. They are in fact so intertwined, you cannot separate them. The lordship of Christ, what does it mean in practical terms? It means total commitment to him as Lord. That's what it means. It is really the same thing said in a different way. Now this is so important to grasp. We must ever more deeply understand what it means to be totally committed; or to say it the other way, what it means that Jesus is totally Lord in our lives. The two things say exactly the same thing. There is no difference in meaning. And that is why both can be pictured in terms of this perfect mustard seed.

Are You Totally Committed to Jesus As Lord?

Now ask yourself this: Can you speak the Word of God with power? Can I speak the Word of God with power? The answer depends on only one thing. Am I totally submitted to Jesus as Lord? Is he absolutely Lord in my life in every sense? Can you honestly say that? That there is nothing in your life that is not under his lordship? That is what total commitment is. That is what the lordship of Christ means.

Is there anything in your life over which he is not Lord? Can you honestly say it? If the Lord Jesus commanded you this day to go forth to a certain place, will you go immediately? Without question? Without argument? Without hesitation? Would you do everything that he commands you? That is the question. Are you totally submitted to him? If not, then you will not be able to serve him with power. You will not be able to experience his power in your life.

Notice who these words are being addressed to. They are addressed to the apostles. The apostles have left everything to follow Jesus. Surely they are totally committed? Oh no! I have said this before and I will say this again: Never suppose that every preacher is a totally committed man. Far from it! Never assume that every preacher is a totally committed man. Never assume that every Christian worker is totally committed. Not necessarily so. Never assume that every missionary is totally committed. Not necessarily so. People have become pastors and missionaries and Christian workers for reasons quite other than total commitment.

We thank God for those who are totally committed. But there are pastors who have become pastors for quite other reasons, and some unfortunately have become pastors for no other reason than that they could not succeed in any other job. They could not get into university. They failed their exams. They could not get any-

where, so where else is there to go? Well, Bible school, of course. Generally, the standard is lower there, and you can get in there without high academic qualifications. And therefore, of course, the logical outcome is to become a pastor, because what other job can you have? Now I say this not in any way to disgrace any pastors. But you and I know that that is the truth, and we are here to speak the truth. It may have nothing to do with total commitment. Frankly, there was no other way to go; it is as simple as that.

I have talked to pastors who have told me this very truthfully. I asked, "Why are you in the pastorate?" and he said, "Well, when I graduated, I could not get into Hong Kong University and I could not get into the Chinese University of Hong Kong either, where else to go but the Bible School?" Now this is disgraceful if, that is to say, the only reason he became a pastor was because that was the only job open to him. Unfortunately there are quite a number of such cases. So do not imagine that full time workers are necessarily totally committed.

It is Very Dangerous to Serve God for the Wrong Reasons

Now you say, surely the apostles did not become apostles for that reason. But if you read the accounts of the Gospels very carefully, you will notice that their motive was not always that commendable. What was the motive of some? You remember James and John? [They said to Jesus,] "When you become king, make sure to appoint us two as foreign minister or as finance minister; one on your right hand and one on your left." What did they become apostles for? Well, Jesus is going to be the Messianic King. He is the Messiah. The Messiah, among the Jews, means the King. Well, that is wonderful, he is the Anointed One. Who is anointed? The king is anointed. "When he becomes king, I will be, at least, foreign minister, maybe finance minister. If he looks on me with favor, I might even be prime minister, you never know."

Is that the reason for becoming an apostle? Unfortunately, yes. You notice then that sometimes we tend to glorify them too much. But the Gospels are so ruthlessly honest. They tell us James and John came and asked for these high places in government. They were even willing to pay the price; they were willing to accept some suffering. So long as the end result is good, who worries! Their motive was not that commendable. They went in not with the intention of serving Jesus simply as such, but with "What can I get out of this? What glory, what material advantages can I get out of this?" So, you see, it is not so singular and unusual that people become pastors and Christian workers for motives that are less than honorable, less than worthy.

But have you got the faith of the mustard seed, the faith of the Kingdom of God? James and John certainly had faith in Jesus. Jesus was not yet king at that point and they already had faith that he would become king. Oh, that requires faith! You have got to have faith in a person, to trust him that one day he will succeed, even though the government, the Sadducees, the people in power were rejecting Jesus. He was at this time simply a rabbi, a teacher walking around in Palestine, yet they had faith that he would become king. They had faith that he was the Messiah. They certainly had faith, but their faith was the kind that was hoping to get something out of it.

James and John did change. John became the most outstanding and most spiritual-minded apostle later on because he got transplanted. At that stage, he was not transplanted yet. At that stage, he still had not got his faith as perfect as a mustard seed. But how great was the change! John realized afterwards that he had to be utterly born anew; his whole thinking had to be transformed. He had to cease thinking in those old ways. And so he wrote the Gospel of John, the most spiritual Gospel there is. So great was the transformation in his life.

But there was one person who did not get transformed and that was Judas. He fell away because, in the first place, he joined the apostles, he joined Jesus for the wrong reasons. It is very dangerous to serve God for the wrong reasons.

Perfect Faith — Serving As Slave of Christ

So, we ask this question: Is your faith complete? But what has the question got to do with the parable? Well, the four verses that follow, then, are going to tell us about this. The Lord Jesus goes on to illustrate his point [with this parable]. “*Will any one of you...*” There is a Greek particle “*οὐετίς*” [de] connecting v7 with v6 which is not translated, a particle which can be translated as ‘but’ or ‘and’ or ‘however’. “*However, will anyone of you who has a servant plowing or keeping sheep say to him as he has come in from the field, ‘Come at once and sit down at table’?*” Would you say that? And so, the Lord Jesus goes on to tell this parable.

The first thing to notice is the word ‘servant’. If you had a servant who has been working all day in the field and he comes in, would you then serve him or would he still have to serve you? The answer, of course, is it is the servant’s job to serve. Of course, the master is not going to serve the servant!

The word translated ‘servant’ is the Greek word for ‘slave’. And that is very important. It is a slave that is in question. And that is very important for us to understand because a slave has been bought with a price. He has been bought; he belongs to his master. We, too, have been bought with a price. [1Cor 6:19-29] We are not our

own. We belong to God. We are slaves of God. As Paul says, “you belong to Christ; and Christ belongs to God.” [1Cor 3:23, NASB] Therefore we are slaves of God and we are slaves of Christ. If you are slaves of Christ, then it follows that you are to serve him; you are his servant, his slave. What does a slave do? He serves.

I cannot understand the kind of Christianity that is taught today in which it seems that Jesus is here to serve us rather than we serve him. Every true Christian is a servant of Christ. And in the Bible there is no higher honor, no more glorious title than to be called a servant or a slave of Christ. Paul glories in this title. You notice, in his letters, he writes with the title ‘Paul, slave of Christ Jesus’. [Rom 1:1, Phi 1:1] Now, to understand this parable, this is the first point you must grasp. We are talking about a slave who belongs to his master.

Total Commitment — Serving Constantly

What is then the job of a slave? The job of the slave is to work, to serve, and to serve constantly, not sometimes and occasionally, but all the time, day by day, moment by moment. So we have these words: ‘a servant plowing’ or ‘keeping sheep’. Now, not all servants have the same job. Some plow and some keep sheep. Keeping sheep is what a pastor does; the word ‘pastor’ means a shepherd. So, my job is to look after the sheep. Other people’s job may be looking after the fields and bringing forth much fruit.

Another thing to observe here is that in the original we have a present tense, a present participle. The point of the present participle means that this plowing is a constant process. It is not that he just plowed for five minutes or looked after the sheep for half an hour. He has constantly been plowing [or shepherding]. Service is not service unless it is constant, constantly serving. They work all day — the shepherds and farmers work from very early in the morning — and at the evening, they come home. Surely, it is time to rest now, isn’t it? And so, he comes home and he is he going to sit down and have his meal? Oh! No, no. His work is not finished yet! Ah! This is a hard life, to be a slave, to be a servant. He works all day in the field and he comes home and now he has to serve his master. Well, the master is not going to serve his slave, is he? He is not going to say, “Oh, here comes the servant. So, okay I have cooked your supper for you. Now come and sit down and have supper.” What master would say that? No earthly master would do that. Of course, the servant’s job is still to serve whether it is on the field or when he comes back after a day’s work. What is the spiritual meaning of this? That is very interesting. Here we see that the Lord Jesus is saying, “You asked me what total commitment is. This is total commitment. You are serving all the time, at no stage do you stop serving.”

There is an interesting parallel to the kind of lives that we live, the kind of life that you live. You may be working all day, say in your college or in the hospital or in your office. That is like plowing and keeping the sheep. It is working outside all day. When you come home at night, you say, "Well, the night is for me. I have been working all day. So I am going to sit back and enjoy myself now." Oh no, no. When you come home, you continue to work. "Hey," you say, "I have been working." Yes, but notice the distinction.

Look at this picture that the Lord Jesus paints here – the servant plowing in the field or looking after the sheep. Is he doing it for the lord? Oh yes, he is doing something for the lord, but not directly to the lord or for the lord. However, when he comes back, he is serving the lord directly. He is serving him his supper. That is a very interesting picture. One is serving away from the lord, in a certain sense, but also for the lord. The other is serving directly to the lord, or in relation to the lord, cooking his meal, serving it to him. This makes me think of these two kinds of work that we are engaged in. Both are for the Lord, and yet, they are for the Lord in a different way.

Now if you are, say, working in an office, are you working in the office for the Lord or not for the Lord? If you are a Christian, of course whatever you do, you do for the Lord. [Col 3:23-24] You are not directly serving him but you are doing it for him. When you come home you say, "Well, that's it. That is enough for today. I worked eight hours today." In fact the Palestinian farmer worked more than eight hours. We, today, feel ourselves to be overworked when we have done eight hours in the office and a large part of the time sipping coffee. In those days, of course, there was no sipping coffee in the field; you worked all day long under the hot sun. Now when you come home, you say, "That's it. Now I'm finished for today." But the true servant of Christ says, "Now I'm going to have a time of fellowship with the Lord," or "I'm going to do something directly for the Lord."

I see many of you are doing this. Some of you work in the office all day and then you come home and ...what do you do? You are on the Newsletter Team; you spend the rest of the evening typing out the newsletter. You see? You are doing something now directly for the Lord. Both kinds of work are for the Lord. Never think of so-called 'secular work' as not being for the Lord. Whatever work you are doing — whether as a lawyer or a dentist or a doctor or an engineer, whatever it is — if you are a true Christian, you do your work for the Lord. Yet, know that though it is for the Lord, it is in an indirect sense. And when you are doing something directly for the Lord, then you are like the servant serving him at the table.

Notice these words in v10, the last verse: "*So also, when you have done all that is*

commanded you..." please notice the word 'all'. We saw right at the beginning that the mustard seed is complete and perfect. I have used the word 'total'; the word 'all' simply means total. You see, that is where 'total commitment' comes from. The word 'all' stresses the totality, the completeness of that commitment. "*When you have done all that is commanded you...*" We want to say, "Ah, when I have done all that is commanded me, then I am really a saint. I am perfect." Oh no! You are nothing very special yet. It says then, in v10, "...say, '*We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty.*'"

We are Unprofitable Servants

The word that is translated 'unworthy' means basically 'unprofitable'. Now what does that mean? Is it just a mark of humility? Is that the way to have perfect faith by saying, "I am unworthy, I am useless, I am unprofitable?" No, no. That is not the point. In the Christian life the only way to be humble is simply to accept the facts: you cannot be more humble than you should be.

What it means is this: The word translated '*what is our duty*' is from the Greek word 'όφείλω' [ophei'lō] which means 'to owe a debt'; it is to pay back what you owe. Now you understand. There is nothing that we have that we have not received from God, as Paul says. "*What have you got that you didn't receive?*" [1Cor 4:7] Whatever we are, we are by the grace of God. Whatever we have, we have by the grace of God. I have nothing that God has not given to me. Whatever I have comes from God. Therefore everything I have I owe to him.

Now say, you lent somebody five dollars and then he gives you back five dollars. Well, what was your profit? The profit was zero. You simply got back what was owed to you. Now when I give back to God whatever I have got, what does he profit from me? Zero, nothing. All he got was what he gave me in the first place. He gave me my life. He gave me my time. He gave me my strength. He gave me everything. Whatever I give back to him I got from him in the first place. What was his profit? Zero. He got nothing but what he gave me in the first place.

So, when I am saying, "I am an unprofitable servant," it means not that I am useless to God. It doesn't mean you are useless; you are very valuable to God. But it is not that God got any profit out of you that he could not get anyway. You have not added anything to God that he did not have before. Does God get richer because you gave him five dollars? Does he get wiser because you gave him one hour or five hours of your time?

We always have the feeling we did give God something. He somehow got a bit

richer because he got me. Now if you keep thinking like this, you have really not understood the spiritual life. He does not get any richer because I gave \$100 in the offering. If I gave \$1,000 in the offering, God would not get \$1,000 richer. The church bank account gets bigger. But God's bank account does not get bigger. In any case, does God need my \$1,000 or whatever it is I can offer him? The point is not that we are unprofitable to the church or to other people. We are talking about being unprofitable to him. As the Scripture says, "What is it that the hands of man can contribute to God?" To him personally?

Now again this in no way means that you are worthless to God. You are most precious to God. You are very valuable to God, not because you have given anything to God. Now, for example my little girl is very precious to me. Is it because I got a lot of money from her? I got nothing. I keep losing money; she is the biggest expense in the household. I sometimes tended to think if I did not have a little daughter, how much money I would save. Is it because she gives me lots of time? No, in fact she takes up a lot of my time. So, she is very precious to me because of what? I did not get any richer. I did not get more time. Come to think of it, I am not sure that I got anything. I have got her but she is a financial liability to me. I have got her but she consumes a lot of my time. In terms of profit, I make no profit at all.

And when you think of it like this, you begin to realize the situation with God. What does God get out of us? Well, you say, "We give him joy." Sure we give him joy, but we also give him a lot of heartaches. My little girl gives me some joy and she gives me an awful lot of pain too, especially when she is naughty. She wants some sweets and if you say 'no', she asks, "Why? Why can't I have sweets? What is wrong with sweets?" You start explaining for the hundredth time that it is bad for the teeth. She says, "I don't care if my teeth go bad." And I say, "Well, I do care because I have got to pay the dentist's bill." I never get anywhere with this argument and this logic. My logic is not logic to her. It makes no sense to her. So, surely you have a headache on your hands. I get a lot more pain than joy out of her at this present stage. Hopefully one day it will change! But anyone who has ever had a son or a daughter will know that, in most cases, he or she takes so much of your money and time, gives you so many problems and argues with you over this and that.

So this is the situation. We always think, "God has me! How fortunate he is! Look how much joy I give to God!" We never think about how much heartache we give to God, then that is really the problem. How many times have you grieved the Spirit of God? We really must come to recognize that we are unprofitable, that God really does not get much out of us. He saves us for our sake, because he loves us that much. I love my daughter. I cannot think of a logical reason except to say that

she is my daughter. I do not know what other logical reason I can give. Maybe you have a better reason for loving your daughter. Maybe you can enlighten me as to your reasons. Maybe I have to learn something here. But certainly, even if we could get something from our daughter, or our son, that is not the case with God. What has he not got that he might hope to get from us?

Serving Without Murmur or Complaint

What is the whole point of this parable? What is the Lord teaching us? The Lord Jesus is teaching us — and we know that the central theme in his teaching is the Kingdom of God — that it is our logical business as a Christian, as a disciple, as an apostle (in this case, since he is speaking to the apostles), to be servants — to serve God and to serve Christ utterly and completely, without murmur and without complaint!

Notice that if the servant came back and said, “Hey, I’m going on strike. I mean, I am being mistreated. Look at me! Just look at the sweat on me! I’ve been working all day in the field and I come into the house and you tell me to gird my apron on and cook a meal for you. Haven’t you got any heart? Haven’t you got any feelings? I have been working all day. Have a heart! This is against the law. It’s an eight-hour day nowadays. You can’t ask me to come and work when I come back home. Hey, I’m going on strike! I’ll join the union!”

Well, I would not be surprised that many Christians think like this too. But most of us, we are here serving the Lord day in and day out, sowing in season and out of season, whether it is morning or noon or night or midnight or early morning, whatever it is. We are there constantly to serve and consider it a privilege to do so. Do you see this servant grumbling? No, he does not grumble; he serves faithfully, truly, all the way.

Prepared to Do What You Command Others to Do

One last point to bear in mind: We are saved to serve. But let us bear in mind that the Lord Jesus does not treat his servants as a worldly master does. That is the remarkable thing. In fact, inconceivable as the picture is, the Lord Jesus serves us when we serve him. When did a master ever serve his servant? And yet, that is what the Lord Jesus did. Lk 12:37 is a verse that really touches my heart. He says that if you serve as that servant does serve, *“Blessed are those servants whom the master finds awake when he comes; truly, I say to you, he will gird himself and have them sit at table, and he will come and serve them.”* The master himself will come and serve his servants! The Lord Jesus is not a master who throws demands

at his servants, shouts orders at them. No, no. Remember always what the Lord Jesus did at the last supper, how he knelt down before his disciples and washed their feet.

This is the other and final principle — the Lord Jesus never commanded us to do anything that he himself did not do. Now this is the most wonderful thing to observe. Whatever he commanded us to do he did himself. When he was here in this world, he served his Father in that same way, morning, noon and night. There are twelve hours in a day and he served God all those twelve hours, faithfully, without murmur, obedient unto death. And not only did he serve his Father, he tells us there in Luke Chapter 12 that on that day, he will serve us. What a Master! What a Lord! I mean, if you are only serving the worldly bosses who are often ruthless and are quite ready to extort you and take whatever you have to give, then how much more privileged it is to serve a Master like this? Always remember this: Never command what you yourself are not prepared to do.

This then is the final point about this perfect faith: this perfect faith that is there utterly to serve. We can say, we are totally committed, but what does that mean? What is total commitment? I am not totally committed until I am prepared to serve and to serve with every last ounce of strength that I have, every bit of energy that I have got. Are you totally committed? If you are, then set an example of it that you are prepared to do what you command others to do. He that will not do what he himself commands will never be entrusted with authority. The finest general was the best soldier himself. Because when he was a soldier, he obeyed implicitly. Only the person who obeys has the right to command. The person who has never obeyed has no right to command. The Lord Jesus has right to command as Lord because he himself obeyed unto death. That is the secret of power. That is what total commitment is about.

Thus, here then, we conclude as we sum up. What we see here today is the teaching of exceedingly great importance. We all, if we truly love God and the Lord, want to pray this prayer to God, like the apostles' request, "Increase our faith!", are you prepared to face the condition for increasing the faith? As the Lord Jesus answered, "Do you really want to increase your faith? Then here is the parable I'm going to tell you." The way to increase your faith is to become totally subjected to the Lord, every part of your life committed to him and submitted to him, serving him without murmur and without grumbling, from morning to night. Never say, "I have done too much. This is going beyond me. I have given too much." I say with shame sometimes when I am utterly exhausted, I say, "I have given too much." And then I am ashamed. How could I ever give too much? It is not possible to give too much, because there is nothing I have that does not belong to him anyway, whether it is

my strength, my physical energy, my time, whatever I possess is his in the first place. Only when we come to this attitude do we understand total commitment: that I can never give too much to my Lord. I can never give too much of my time or my money. At no stage can I congratulate myself and say, “I am a profitable servant; he has gained a lot from me.”

Now I beg of you to understand this attitude, because we live today in an age where the church is a church without power. I pray that we as a church may, by God’s grace, become a church with power. And the only path to power is the path of total service. When you have done all, not just some part of it, not just most of it, when you have done all that has been commanded you, and you are able to say, “*We are unprofitable servants.*” Then you will have the power that can say to the sycamore tree, to the mulberry tree, “Move! Be planted in the sea!” and it will obey you. Now this is a word of God that can be tested. I say the glory of the Gospel is not that it tells you certain things that there is no way for you to prove whether it is true or not. I have proved it and I have found it to be true. I have seen lives transplanted, rooted up from this world and transplanted into his kingdom.

We see it happening among us. See how one turns his back upon the world, to be rooted up, even leaving behind his house, and a successful career, to serve the Lord elsewhere. This is all made possible with that first and foremost step when he was rooted up from the darkness of sin and transplanted into the Kingdom of God.

Christian is a Tree Growing in the Sea!

Have you ever seen this miracle? That is what the Christian is: a tree growing in the sea! Have you ever seen it? The Christian is a wonder to the world. The Christian must always be a puzzle to the world. Who can understand a man who is getting a vast salary, being very successful in his career, suddenly turning his back upon his career to go out and preach the Gospel, going to another place, with virtually no money and no sure prospect of a future? I mean, it is a wonder. No wonder his boss says, “I don’t understand what you’re doing. I don’t understand you. You’ve got such a good job. You are successful in your career and you are giving up everything? Going for one year of training, getting no money, losing all the money in the process and going out to preach the Gospel? What is this?” The Christian is always a puzzle to the world. They cannot understand it. They cannot figure it out. That is insecurity. From the world’s point of view, it is so insecure to be planted in the sea. But the child of God planted in the sea is more secure than anywhere else.

The world looks at the sea and says, “I don’t want to be planted in the sea; it’s too uncertain.” You become a wonder, a marvel in the eyes of the world. I would that

every Christian here would so live the Christian life of this total service, this total commitment to Christ that you become a wonder to the world. That is how we become light in the world. That is how we shine in the world; it is when people are puzzled by you. People are amazed, "How can it be that a tree planted in the sea is nonetheless steady; it grows and is secure in the sea? It is a wonder! The hand of God has done it!" It defies logical explanation because it is the work of God. I then pray that you may truly take to heart these wonderful words of the Lord Jesus. He challenges us to prove God's power. And those who have proved God's power know that his word is true.



End of message

This is an edited transcription of the message.

The editors accept full responsibility for arrangement and addition of Bible references.

*All Scripture quotations are from the Revised Standard Version,
unless otherwise specified.*



To our dear readers:

We have been delayed in bringing the Oasis to you -- for this we apologize.

In this issue of Oasis, you will read about Jesus' response to the disciples' plea, "Increase our faith." May we desire this too in our lives and understand its connection to servant hood.

Let's press on toward the high calling of our God in Christ Jesus!

From the Oasis Team



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