

Meeting With Christ

Practical and Exegetical Studies on the Words of Jesus Christ

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Based on sermons of Pasteur Eric Chang

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THE PARABLE OF THE UNPROFITABLE SERVANT

Luke 17:5-10

In order to give His disciples a perspective on the meaning of servanthood, the Lord Jesus told the parable of the unprofitable servant. This story is found in Luke 17:7-10. We will read from v. 5.

Luke 17:5. And the apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!"

6 And the Lord said, "If you had faith like a mustard seed, you would say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and be planted in the sea'; and it would obey you.

7 "But which of you, having a slave plowing or tending sheep, will say to him when he has come in from the field, 'Come immediately and sit down to eat'?

8 "But will he not say to him, 'Prepare something for me to eat, and properly clothe yourself and serve me until I have eaten and drunk; and afterward you will eat and drink'?

9 "He does not thank the slave because he did the things which were commanded, does he?

10 "So you too, when you do all the things which are commanded you, say, 'We are unworthy slaves; we have done only that which we ought to have done.'"

If you had genuine faith

Jesus is speaking here specifically to the apostles (v. 1). The Twelve are asking Jesus, *Increase our faith*. In answer to that request, Jesus talks about the importance of having faith and what faith can do. And then, He goes on to tell this parable.

What is the point of the parable? In what way is the parable connected to the apostles' request to have their faith increased? That's what we need to examine.

Let us look at the words in v. 5. *And the apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith."* The apostles were confessing that their faith was not great enough. Apparently they realized that their faith was too weak to ever live according to what Jesus was talking about. In vv. 1 to 4, Jesus gave to those who would live in His kingdom commands like not causing others to stumble and always being willing to forgive. With such instructions, the apostles felt that they desperately needed greater faith. So they asked Jesus to help them develop their faith.

Now, listen to Jesus' answer. He alters the request for more faith and speaks of 'having' faith. *If you had faith like a mustard seed...* This is a hypothetical statement which seems to imply that they don't possess that kind of faith. We have the impression that He is saying, 'You don't have faith as a grain of mustard seed'.

Don't you find that puzzling? The mustard seed was proverbial for its small size. It was the smallest seed known to the farmers in Palestine. Is it possible for a person to be an apostle without having faith like a grain of mustard?

If we think in those terms, we have missed the point of Jesus' teaching. His reply should not be taken as denying the reality of the apostles' faith of course. Notice how He shifts the focus. He moves from the request to have more faith to a matter of possessing and having faith. For Jesus, it is a question of genuineness, not so much of quantity. If there is real faith, then effects follow.

Faith is not assessed in terms of size. It is assessed in terms of its quality. There is no point saying that your faith is as big as the rock of Gibraltar because a rock has no life. It sure is big but it will never grow. It will never increase. On the other hand, a mustard seed may be very small in size but it is complete. It is complete in the sense that it has life in it. If you put it in the ground, it will grow.

And a little bit of that kind of faith can accomplish amazing things. Jesus said that even small faith, if it is genuine, could uproot a tree and send it into the sea. *And the Lord said, "If you had faith like a mustard seed, you would say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and be planted in the sea'; and it would obey you.* In the gospel of Matthew, we find a similar teaching when Jesus said that a mountain could be told to throw itself into the sea (Matthew 21:21).

Planting a tree in the water?

We have to take a closer look at this idea of uprooting a mulberry tree and replanting it in the sea because it raises some questions. Even if we don't take it literally, we have to admit that the choice of the image is somewhat puzzling. Notice carefully the words. ... *planted in the sea*. Not 'thrown' into the sea. Since when do we plant a tree in the sea? We plant trees on dry ground, not in the water. Sometimes we can see whole trees floating in a river and being swept away by the current. But that's not planting. The tree is just being carried away by the water. Jesus is saying that by your word of command, if you have genuine faith, a tree will move from the dry land and be planted (not fall) into the sea. The least we can say is that it is an unusual image.

But there is another question. What is the point of planting a tree in the sea? It seems pointless to tell the disciples to occupy themselves with such activity. Was Jesus really encouraging them to spend their time watching trees leap into the sea? Or is this a demonstration of power for the sake of power?

Here we have to understand Jesus' words spiritually because there is a spiritual meaning behind His statement. He is not only saying that nothing is impossible to faith. When we keep the symbolic language of the Bible in mind, we begin to have another understanding of what the Lord is saying.

Contrary to the course of nature

In the Bible, the tree is often used to symbolize a human being. People are compared to trees. For example, we have Psalm 1:3, the well-known passage where the righteous person is compared to a tree planted by the rivers of water. In the NT, again in a well-known picture, Jesus uses the image of a tree bearing fruit as an illustration of a believer bearing spiritual fruit.

And what happens to this tree? It is transplanted, or transferred, from the ground where it normally grows to a place where it does not normally live. Now, think about it. Isn't it what happens to us when we are saved? When we become a Christian, a transplantation takes place. *God delivered us from the domain of darkness*, Paul says in Colossians 1:13, *and (He) transferred us to the kingdom*

of His beloved Son. This transplantation is a picture of our salvation. A person who has been saved is one whom God transfers out of the world and into the kingdom of light.

Remember that putting down the roots, in the parable of the sower, means to get a grip of something. Let's consider that in the context of a tree. 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 at this world – the kingdom of darkness. But when this person makes a commitment to follow Christ, he is uprooted from the world and is transplanted into a new environment which is not natural to him. In Romans 11, Paul speaks of being 'grafted contrary to nature'. We are compared to the branches of a wild olive tree which are grafted into a cultivated olive tree. And this transfer is contrary to nature. Being saved is contrary to nature because we are removed from the ground which is familiar to us, from the life in the world, to be transplanted into a new kind of life in the kingdom of God.

Washed by the sea

Here is another symbol. Water is often used in the Bible as a picture of spiritual life. 'Those who thirst, come to Me and drink', Jesus said in John 7:37. On the other hand, dryness, barrenness, desert land, these are pictures of death. Where there is no water, there is no life.

But there is more to it than that. Water is not only a life-sustaining agent but it is also a cleansing one. In this regard, water is often associated with the OT prescriptions for removing ceremonial defilement. In the NT, it is used as a symbol of the cleansing of the soul from sin. Take for example Hebrews 10:22: *Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and **our bodies washed with pure water.***

Interestingly, in 1Kings 7:21-23, we are told that there is a 'sea' in front of the temple. *Now he made the **sea** of cast metal...* This sea was actually the laver of the tabernacle. It was huge in size: 5 meters in diameter and 2.5 meters high. It was called a sea because of the great quantity of water it held. It was usual in Jewish thinking to call a large collection of water a sea. And the sea here in 1Kings 7 was a place of cleaning in which the priests were to wash when they went to minister before God.

There is another sea that the Bible talks about. This one is located in front of the throne of God. It is described in Revelation 4:6. There we read that *before the throne there was a **sea** of glass, like crystal.* This sea looks like crystal, signifying the purity of that sea and its cleansing property. It is quite possible that the sea in Revelation is an allusion to the sea in front of the temple. This seems to indicate that those who are admitted into the presence of God, either on earth or in heaven, must be washed – cleansed – from all sin.

So you get the picture. 'What is happening is this', the Lord Jesus says. 'If you had faith, you will be able to say and it would happen'. Notice how it is done. It is accomplished by a word. It is not that you, because you had faith, will suddenly become a strong Samson, and you will grab hold of this tree, pull it out of the ground and plant it in the sea. No, you don't even move. It is your word that does it. 'You will say to this tree, and it would obey'.

Why will the tree obey? Because God's power is going to work through you. It is God's power that accomplishes such things. When you are living in this fellowship with Him that is called faith, then, when you speak His word, things begin to happen. People begin to change. People are born again. When a person becomes a Christian, the situation can be compared to a tree that is uprooted and planted in the water, the sea. He is removed from the kingdom of darkness and transferred into the kingdom of God. As he is being cleansed from his sin, he receives a new life. That's the picture.

Compared to a mustard seed

Notice this other point. Here faith is compared to a mustard seed. *If you had faith like a mustard seed...* Something else is compared to a mustard seed in the Lord's teaching. In Luke 13:19, it is the kingdom of God that is compared to a mustard seed. *What is the kingdom of God like? ... It is like a mustard seed, which a man took and put in his garden.* So these two things, faith and the kingdom of God, are both compared to a grain of mustard in the gospel of Luke.

What does that mean? We have mentioned in our study of the parable of the rich fool and Lazarus that the kingdom of God is actually the kingship of God. It is about His sovereignty. It is His lordship in our lives. Now, what is faith? Well, faith is the wholehearted response of the disciple to His lordship, to His kingship, to His sovereignty.

Do you see that they are, in fact, two aspects of the same entity? The kingdom of God, the lordship of Christ in our lives is meaningless unless we respond to it with our whole being. And faith means that I commit myself to Jesus in such a way that He becomes totally Lord in my life. Now you see why the mustard seed can represent both the lordship of Christ and our total commitment to Him as Lord. They are really two sides of the same coin.

A matter of duty

This kingdom faith, the faith of the kingdom of God, has great power because it is the power of God that is at work. But when people have such faith, there is a danger that they may become prideful and puffed up. The Lord Jesus then goes on to tell the apostles a parable.

'Suppose', Jesus says, 'that one of you has a servant whom you had put to work plowing the field. At the end of the day, would you welcome him to the table and invite him to sit down and eat the food that you prepared? Of course not! It is the servant who must prepare the meal, serve it to you, and then wait until you have finished eating. Only then can he feed himself. The master's wishes always come first'.

Then Jesus asks a question which is the center of the comparison. 'Do you thank the slave for doing what you commanded him to do? Again, the answer is, 'Of course not! The slave did what he is supposed to do. He has simply performed his duty'. The context of the parable is the cold and impersonal relationship of the ancient world in which a slave was expected to obey whatever his master told him to do. If the master told his servant to plow the field during the day and to prepare supper after returning home, he merely obeyed because he knew that this was his task. There is no need to thank him for that.

In the last verse of the parable (v. 10), Jesus compares the picture to the disciple's service to God. *So you too, when you do **all** the things which are commanded you.* Notice the word 'all'. The disciple cannot pick and choose what to obey. We said at the beginning that the mustard seed, though very small, is complete and perfect. It has everything that is needed to grow. The word 'all' simply means 'total'. The Bible uses it to express the totality, the completeness of one's commitment. Think of Deuteronomy 6:5. *You shall love the Lord your God with **all** your heart, with **all** your soul, and with **all** your strength.*

And so, when you have done all that is commanded you, you don't say to yourself, 'I'm somebody very special.' You say, *We are unworthy slaves; we have done only that which we ought to have done.* The adjective 'unworthy' does not convey the sense of useless. Neither is this just an expression of modesty. 'Unworthy' (*achreioi*) means 'not yielding gain'. Some Bibles have the word 'unprofitable', which is probably a better translation. An unprofitable servant. It is used of the man who hid his talent in the parable of the talents. *And cast the unprofitable servant into the outer*

darkness (Matthew 25:30). From the perspective of our parable, we are all unprofitable servants because our best service does not bring gain to God. We do not add anything to God that He didn't have before. At best, we have done what was our duty.

Conclusion

What then is the whole point of this parable? This story illustrates the ideal attitude that a disciple should have in serving God. A disciple should never forget his position before God. He has been brought into the kingdom by the precious blood of Christ (1Corinthians 6:20; 7:23; 1Peter 1:18-19). And because such a price has been paid for him, the believer can take no credit for the work he does in God's kingdom. His attitude can only be that of a humble and grateful servant who understands that service does not obligate God to him.

The apostle Paul was one who had this kind of attitude. When thinking of what God had done for him, Paul speaks of sonship and freedom from slavery. When thinking of his own responsibility to Christ, he speaks of himself as a slave of Christ and as one who is under obligation to the Lord who redeemed him. *Paul, a bond-servant of Christ Jesus*, he says in Romans 1:1, *called as an apostle*.

Remember that the context in which we find this parable is a series of teachings for Jesus' disciples about faith. The Lord's insistence that forgiveness be granted continually is such a hard teaching that the disciples ask for an increase in faith. Jesus responds that authentic faith, though small in size, can accomplish amazing things. But these great works can lead to the danger of attributing them to personal achievement. Some might even think that their service for God obligates Him to honor them. So Jesus warns those people, by a parable, to regard their service as nothing more than a duty.