

DUTY IS A PRIVILEGE!

Today's Text: Lk 17: 1-10

Extracts:

Then [Jesus] said to His disciples, ... “And which of you, having a servant plowing or tending sheep, will say to him when he has come in from the field, ‘Come at once and sit down and eat’? but will he not rather say to him, ‘Prepare something for my supper, and gird yourself and serve me till I have eaten and drunk, and afterward you will eat and drink’? Does he thank that servant because he did the things that were commanded him? I think not. So likewise you, when you have done all those things which you are commanded, say, ‘We are unprofitable servants. We have done what was our duty to do’” [Lk 17: 1a, 7-10]

Biryam Bappa from Gombe State in the north-eastern part of Nigeria has dragged his son, Lewi Biryam, to a local Civil Area Court, demanding the sum of Naira 600,000 (US\$4,000) as compensation for his upbringing and education.¹ The action follows the father's claim that since his son graduated from university and got a job, he had neglected him and the rest of his family. Therefore, he believed that, having fulfilled his parental obligations to his son, he was entitled to compensation for neglect. In his defence, the son admitted to the court that his father took good care of him and that no amount of money could serve as adequate compensation for his father's care. No verdict has been pronounced.

In the court of public opinion, especially in non-Western societies where they view diligent performance of parental duty to children as a social security investment, the father in that story wins the case handily. But the Scriptures state quite clearly that “the children ought not to lay up for the parents, but the parents for the children” [2 Cor. 12: 14]. Therefore, Mr. Bappa ought to see his duty as a parent as a privilege that rich but childless couples would love to have. No matter the duty you perform, you face a similar situation. What does God expect you to do if you want to glorify Him through it? In this week's Bible text, Jesus used the analogy of a servant's earnest service to his master to teach His disciples (and us) what should be our proper attitude and response to doing God's duty.

¹ Based on the following report: “Father drags son to court for neglect,” *Vanguard News*, Thursday, 3 March 2011; <http://www.vanguardngr.com/2011/03/father-drags-son-to-court-for-neglect/>

1. Background: Duty does not mean servile work!

We can define duty as something that we are commanded to do. It can be legal, such as our statutory obligations, or religious, such as church work, or moral, such as our general conduct. An example is the parental obligation to properly raise the children that they have brought into the world. No matter what duty we find ourselves doing, the common denominator is the need to render service. The reward that we may get out of it is another matter, and it may depend on how we view duty. Some people see it as a privilege, that is, an opportunity to do something that many other people are qualified (and are willing) to do better. Some people may also see it as an investment, that is, an opportunity for instant, extant or expected reward. But how does God want us to see duty? That is the subject that Jesus has treated in this week's study.

In response to provocations from the scribes and Pharisees, Jesus had before this week's Bible text covered several tough subjects, such as greed [Lk 16: 1-17], forgiveness and faith [Lk 17: 1-6]. His disciples who had heard it all became worried that only somebody with extraordinary faith would be able to do what Jesus was asking for. In response, He assured them that it had nothing to do with the size of your faith but how well you used it [vv. 5-6]. One area where you can demonstrate your faith is your attitude to your duty, the subject of our study this week. In the story, a man hired a servant to work for him both in his farm and at home. Let us follow the story:

a) *The servant's duty*

The servant's duty was to plow his master's field and tend his sheep [v. 7]. In addition, he also served as his cook and steward, preparing his supper and serving food and drinks [v. 8]. The servant's remuneration package was not disclosed.

Every one of us who performs one duty or the other has a job description, express (in writing) or implied. For example, as a parent, you accept almost instinctively that it is your responsibility to nurture the children you have brought into this world and to educate them. Most parents would starve themselves to give the best to their children. Those of us who are in paid employment may have formal letters of appointment that spell out our job description and duties. To allow no room for ambiguity, they always put a final clause on the list of duties that says, "Any other duties that may be required from time to time."

b) *His master's response*

No matter how well the servant performed his duties, his master never invited him to "come at once and sit down to eat" [v. 7], nor did he thank him "because he did the things that were commanded him" [v. 9].

On the surface, the master looked wicked and ungrateful. In modern management terms, he would be regarded as a bad motivator, an uncaring brute! If you find yourself working for such an employer, you could resign as a dissatisfied employee or reduce your productivity. Unfortunately, there are certain duties that you cannot resign from. For example, can you resign as a parent (at least, morally speaking)? If you cannot resign, how then are you expected to cope with what looks like servile work, that is, work that degrades you? Therefore, we need a deeper understanding of the matter.

c) *But God expects us to be like that steward!*

In concluding the story, Jesus, addressing us, said, “So likewise you, when you have done *all those things which you are commanded*, say, ‘We are unprofitable servants. We have done what was our duty to do’” [v. 10]. Ouch! That is a hard saying but truth is always bitter. Jesus is telling us that we should not see duty as an investment from which to expect reward. Rather, we should see it as a privilege to render earnest and selfless service. You ***do not expect any reward*** and ***when it does not come, you will still not be discouraged from putting in your best!***

If you think that is too harsh, look around you. For example, have you ever received commendations from the tax authorities of your country for voluntarily paying due taxes to them on time? Who has ever commended you for religiously obeying all the traffic rules? Have you ever thanked your wife for each week you have lived together with everything running smoothly? Therefore, duty means service, not servile work. Let us find some cushions to rest on!

2. What duty may demand of you!

The *whole duty of man on earth* is to “fear God and keep His commandments... for God will bring every work into judgment, including every secret thing, whether good or evil” [Eccl. 12: 13-14]. Therefore, Jesus expects us to see duty from a spiritual perspective. In that sense, ***duty means total obedience to the will of God in whatever situation you find yourself.*** Clearly, that makes tough demands on all believers, some of which are as follows:

a) *Your duty is defined by a higher authority!*

It is the employer that defines the content of a job before advertising for candidates to apply for it. Therefore, s(he) is the higher authority on the matter. In like manner, it is God that sets the duties that He wants us to perform in His vineyard. That was what Jesus meant when He told His listeners, “The harvest truly is plentiful, but the labourers are few. Therefore, *pray the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into His*

harvest” [Matt. 9: 37-38]. Jesus came down from heaven, not to do His will but that of His Father that sent Him [Jn 6: 38].

Therefore, since your duty for God, for example, as a parent, teacher, pastor, prophet or administrator [Cf: 1 Cor. 12: 28; Eph. 4: 11], has been defined by God Himself, you cannot vary it to suit your whims and caprices. You either do it as He wants it or you give way for others who can do it better. For example, out of the multitudes of disciples that followed Jesus, He picked only twelve of them as His apostles. One of them, Judas Iscariot betrayed Him. In the end, Judas’ place was taken by another disciple, Matthias [Acts 1: 21-26]. Saul failed as the first king of Israel and God replaced him with a shepherd boy called David. Therefore, *in God’s eyes, nobody is indispensable.*

b) *It may require you to deny yourself!*

Having realized that nobody is indispensable, you can no longer toy with the privilege God has given you to perform a specific duty. It makes you humble and willing to work with or under others. It makes you deny yourself, take up the cross and follow Jesus [Lk 9: 23], realizing that He Himself put down the mantle of divinity to take human form in order to perform His Father’s duty to save us from eternal damnation by dying on the cross [Phil 2: 5-11].

So, when you come to Jesus in response to your calling, put down whatever garment of arrogance you have worn in the secular world. You have become a new creature that walks by faith and not by sight. Now, you can be angry but sin not [Eph. 4: 26]. You can be offended but you must forgive, no matter how often or how frequently you are offended [Lk 17: 3-4]. You now give to others, not because you have but because you care. You then resign from the club of backbiters and rumour mongers. You now eschew sexual immorality. In short, you will no longer walk in the counsel of the ungodly or stand in the path of sinners or sit in the seat of the scornful. Instead, your new delight will be in the Law of the Lord on which you meditate day and night [Ps. 1: 1-2]. Unless you deny yourself, those “easy” chores can look formidable!

c) *It may not be what you like or want but it is what you need!*

Most of us know what we want but hardly what we need. Where we need nourishing food, we crave for brands that make us obese. Where we need a spouse that can complete us and bring us closer to God, we look for the physical or material attributes of beauty, fame or wealth. On the other hand, the duty that God may call you to do for Him may not be what you want but what you need for success or salvation.

For example, during one period of seven years in the days of the judges, Israel was under the control of the Midianites who made sure that neither their crops nor their flocks were allowed to multiply. In fear, the people hid to thresh wheat in their winepresses. So what most people at the time *wanted* was safety from their oppressors but what they actually *needed* was deliverance! So, when the Angel of the Lord appeared to Gideon who was hiding to thresh wheat, He said to him, “The Lord is with you, you mighty man of valour!” [**Judg. 6: 1-24**]. Read the rest of the story to see how Gideon tried to wriggle himself out of the duty. In the end, he reluctantly accepted the duty and God used him to deliver His chosen people. Gideon’s name was changed to Jerubbaal [Let Baal plead his case] after he had successfully destroyed the pagan god of their oppressors [**vv. 25-32**].

d) *It is always painful!*

What God requires you to do may not be attractive; in fact, it may be quite painful. For example, it may require you to give up a lucrative or attention-attracting job to relocate to an obscure corner where all the gadgets of comfort that you have been used to are in short supply. For example, during his ministry, the Lord required the prophet Isaiah to go and remove the sackcloth from his body and take his sandals off his feet and he “walked naked and barefoot [for] three years for a sign and a wonder against Egypt and Ethiopia” [**Is. 20: 1-3**]. Ezekiel’s wife died and God told him not to weep or mourn, as a sign to the people of Israel of his time [**Ezek. 24: 15-18**].

Take the case of Paul through whom God performed so many miracles and wonders, including the privilege to visit Paradise in spirit [**2 Cor. 12: 1-9**]. To ensure that he did not get carried away by the “abundance of the revelations,” he was given a thorn in the flesh, said to be a messenger of Satan to pound him. Three times he asked the Lord to relieve him of the affliction but the Lord refused and told him, “My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness” [**v. 9**]. Therefore, that you are obedient and faithful to the Lord does not mean that you will not have problems because “those who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution” [**2 Tim. 3: 12**]. Hardship and ill-health in the faithful believer can be forms of persecution or an opportunity for you to grow stronger spiritual wings. Therefore, do not let pain scare you away, bearing in mind that a bed of roses has a mattress of thorns!

e) *But if well done, the reward is beyond your expectations!*

Jesus said that we should have the attitude of “unprofitable servants” that have done what was their duty to do [**Lk 17: 10**]. But does that mean that those who have faithfully done their duties for God will not be rewarded?

No! Jesus is saying that you are not the one to prescribe how to be rewarded, just as it is not the employee who prescribes what s(he) is paid after each annual or periodic appraisal. That matter is in the hands of God that you have worked for and, therefore, you can be sure that you will receive much more than you are expecting!

On one occasion, Peter (on behalf, supposedly, of his colleagues) asked Jesus what they would have for leaving all to follow Him. Jesus replied, “Everyone [that includes you!] who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or lands, *for My sake*, shall receive a hundredfold, and inherit eternal life” [Matt. 19: 27-29]. It is instructive that Job lost 7,000 sheep and got back 14,000; he lost 3,000 camels and gained back 6,000, making a hundredfold in each case [Job 1: 3 & 42: 12]. He got back the same number of children that he had lost (7 sons and 3 daughters) because doubling them would not have increased his earthly wealth a hundredfold! When the new Jerusalem shall be descended from heaven at the end of the age, its twelve foundations will bear the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb [Rev. 21: 14]. That is clearly beyond Peter’s expectation!

3. Conclusion: If you don’t do it, others will!

From the forgoing, it is obvious that you are highly privileged to serve God with faithful obedience- as a parent, teacher or administrator, pastor or prophet, healer or helper, etc. In the words of Jesus, “You did not choose Me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should remain, that whatever you ask the Father in My name, He may give you” [Jn 15: 16]. So, *God expects you to perform ALL your assigned duties with the heart of forgiveness, love, joy, self control, faithfulness and suchlike things that confirm that you are Spirit-led* [Gal. 5: 22-25].

Finally, always remember that for every privilege that God extends to you, there are millions of others who are available to replace you. So, if you blow your chance, He will use others!