

A Storytelling Commentary on Luke 17:5-10

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These two sayings of Jesus are essentially independent sayings that have been drawn together in this collection of sayings of Jesus in chapter 17. There is no need to try to make them coherent in relation to the same topic or theme. They are about different things.

The disciples' request is short and pointed: "Increase our faith." Jesus' response is a long sentence about the mulberry tree of several phrases. It builds both in speed and in volume to the climax: "it will obey you."

The second saying about the expectation of rewards introduces the servant in a long sentence that culminates with: "Come here at once and take your place at the table." This is the first possible response to a slave, that Jesus says nobody would ever have. In the second part Jesus asks, "...but will you not say to your slave, to your servant, come in and put on your apron and fix dinner for me...?" This builds up to the climax of the stated expectation that you'd simply ask the servant to do what they would normally do.

The last sentence is translated in the NRSV as "worthless servant." I think a better translation is "unworthy." It's not that the servant is worthless or that we are worthless, it is rather that we are not worthy of receiving some great reward for doing what we're simply supposed to do. So the statement is not about your metaphysical status in relation to the kingdom of God; it's rather whether or not one is worthy to receive such a gift as is implicit in the overall parable.

These are typically provocative sayings of Jesus. The first one is a saying in response to the disciple's request that Jesus increase their faith. His response is in effect, "Pay attention to the little bit of faith that you *do* have, and notice what kind of impact that can achieve. If you have faith the size of a mustard seed [that is, a tiny teeny weenie little bit of faith] you could tell this mulberry tree to be uprooted and planted in the sea and it would obey you."

First of all, planting a mulberry tree in the sea is impossible. It is also improbable to think that you could simply by believing it say to the mulberry tree, "be uprooted and planted in the sea" and it would obey you. The implication of the saying is that this impossible thing could be done with the amount of faith that's the size of a mustard seed. What would happen if you had a *lot* of faith? You would be able to do *incredible* things. The invitation is to consider the tremendous power of a little bit of faith and to pay attention to the faith that we do have.

The second story is a strange story for modern listeners because it reflects the relationships and attitudes toward slaves in ancient Galilee. The clear assumption of the

parable is that Jesus' listeners are tenant farmers who have slaves or servants. Now we know that the landowners in Galilee had many slaves. We really don't know to what degree tenant farmers had one slave. But this parable is apparently addressed to people who have a single slave to whom Jesus can speak regarding their normal daily practice.

The statement is that they would never have a servant who would come in from working and be invited to sit down and have dinner. Rather, they would always say to them, "Okay, put on your apron, fix dinner for me and serve me while I eat and drink and then you may eat and drink." This attitude was rather callous and tough on the part of the master toward slaves. That practice is extended as a metaphor for the attitudes that we should have in relation to expectations from God. Do we expect God to reward us for doing what we are simply supposed to do, what we have been ordered and commanded to do? No, when we've done all we are commanded to do, that's it. There is no need or expectation for further thanks or grace or rewards.

This parable is told against the idea that what we are doing in relation to God is building up points, building up the basis for favors from God. It is told against the tendency of religious people to regard the work that they have done for God as cumulative and as the basis for expecting special gifts or privileges from God. The assumption of Jesus' parable is that people have already received abundant and overwhelming grace from God. The metaphor is not that we are slaves of God but rather that the relationships between masters and slaves can help us identify dimensions of our relationship with God.

In each of these parables Jesus is in different ways calling attention to dimensions of faith in God and our expectations in relation to God.

These sayings of Jesus are typically provocative. They require the listeners to reflect on their meaning about them and God. I encourage you to use them in a provocative way. Outline these stories and interpret them both by telling them and by talking about them as stories that will invite us to examine our own presuppositions, our own interior assumptions both of our faith and our expectations in relation to how we want God to respond.