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## 41. The Unprofitable Servants. Luke 17:5-10

The subject of this parable is that of unprofitable servants. In close connection with it, however, our Lord used a parabolic illustration, that of the grain of mustard seed. Notice at verse seven the use of the little word, "But." "But who is there of you." That shows the connection, and that the parable must be taken with the parabolic illustration.

We consider then first the subject our Lord intended to illustrate; secondly glance at the figures employed; and finally attempt to deduce the teaching from the consideration.

What was the subject illustrated when our Lord used the figure of the grain of mustard seed, and the parable of unprofitable servants? Whatever He said was in answer to an appeal of the apostles. The request came specially from the twelve, whom He had chosen and appointed to be with Him, and whom He had sent forth; whom He was training throughout His ministry for their responsibilities in the days that lay ahead. "The apostles said unto Him, Increase our faith." What followed was an answer to that appeal, which appeal had followed teaching He had been giving them. At the commencement of this seventeenth chapter He had told them that it was impossible but that offences should come, and had warned them with great solemnity "Woe unto him, through whom they come! It were well for him if a millstone were hanged about his neck, and he were thrown into the sea, rather than that he should cause one of these little ones to stumble. Take heed to yourselves; if thy brother sin, rebuke him; and if he repent, forgive him. And if he sin against thee seven times in the day, and seven times turn again to thee, saying, I repent; thou shalt forgive him. And the apostles said unto the Lord, Increase our faith." The request that came from them was an intelligent one, born of their sense of the tremendous urgency of His commands at this point, and of the difficulty to human nature that they would encounter, in attempting to obey them. They did not feel they were equal to that high level to which they were to attain. "Increase our faith." I think intelligence is marked in the fact that what they asked for was an increase, not of love, but of faith. It was an apprehension on their part that life could only be equal to the demands of Jesus by faith, by that activity of the human soul that takes hold upon the invisible. "Increase our faith." It was a great thing they said to Jesus.

That being admitted, we listen to Him as He answered their request. The answer cannot be studied without seeing that our Lord was recognizing, the reason for the weakness of which these men were conscious. He knew, He always knows, and always deals, not with our request upon the surface, but with what lies behind it. That is what He was doing here. They did not need their faith increased; they were not needing quantity, but quality. If they had faith as a grain of mustard seed. He detected that, lying behind their request for an increase of faith which should enable them to fulfil the severity and sternness of His demands, was a hope that if they could gain this power, some increase of faith, there would be some reward following it, there would be some virtue in it, some benefit, following such an attainment that would come to them. This He knew, so His reply in parabolic illustration and parable was based upon a recognition of the reasons for their weakness, and these were the subjects that He illustrated. Faulty faith results from wrong motives. True faith issues in right motives.

Take the two figures. First, a grain of mustard seed. In the parabolic discourses of Jesus in Matthew xiii, He used the same figure in another application, and with another purpose. He then said of the grain of mustard seed, "which indeed is less than all seeds." He now took this very little thing, and said to these men their faith should be like it. What is the principle involved in that? What is there in a grain of mustard seed? In the previous parable He had said the seed, least of all the seeds, grew. There we are face to face with the principle, which is that of life. He was insisting upon the life principle in the grain of mustard seed, and because of that, in its development, it will produce results.

There was an interesting picture in a recent paper of a curious growth, of an enormous piece of statuary split in two, because a seed had been dropped there, and as it developed and grew, its roots going downward, gathered force, and it had split the masonry, and finally the statue. No application was made of it. It was simply a curious picture. However it is interesting, in the light of an old story of a granite tomb in Italy, where a man was buried many years ago, who was flippant in his agnosticism to faith and to Christianity especially. He had given instructions that a slab of granite weighing many tons should be placed over the place of his burial, so that there should be no chance of his body ever coming up, if there was any resurrection! They placed his body in the grave, and placed the granite slab upon it. But a bird passing over, dropped a seed, just an acorn fell there, before they placed the granite slab. The oak tree in time split that granite slab! That is all. We can make the application. The life principle is mightier than any other force. It is there in the grain of mustard seed. Our Lord took it as an illustration of a certain subject; a life principle, capable of growth, and therefore exercising force, producing the most unexpected results.

Then He said, "But who is there of you," and He gave them this picture of labourers, as perhaps we should call them, plowmen, or shepherds keeping sheep, rendering their service. It is an Eastern picture in its terminology. The word used for servant is *doulos*, slave. Slaves are doing their work in the fields, and at the close of the day they still have duty to perform, as they come in from their plowing, or watching over the flocks. Jesus said, What happens? Does the owner of the fields, flocks, ploughs and slaves, invite these men to sit down and have their evening meal? Does he not rather tell them to carry on and do their evening work, and prepare his meal; and when he has eaten, they can take their places at the board? Such the simple picture as He drew it, so well understood by those standing around Him. He asked them this question, Do you say, Thank you? Are we halted as we read that? Are we inclined to say, Of course we say, Thank you? We do, and very often too, but we never need do so. There is nothing in inherent justice that demands that we should thank anyone for service, which is merely the rendering of an obligation, and the doing of a duty. We do say, Thank you; but there is no inherent necessity. At this point Jesus was using the figure that slaves do not sit down first to eat, but only when they have done their duty. The master does not thank them for what they have done. There is no need that he should. If we want to be thanked for doing our duty, that shows our hearts were not in the duty.

How curious to bring those illustrations together, and yet how close together they are. What is the teaching? Take the first illustration of the grain of mustard seed. Men facing the demands of Jesus, feeling how tremendous they are, intelligently feeling it, conscious of their own weakness, in all sincerity said to Jesus, Increase our faith. The plea is not over, People are still praying, for an increase of faith. It reveals a false thinking on a true line, an outlook that is conscious of weakness, and has grasped the value of faith, and asks for an increase. Our Lord said, You do not need more faith, but faith of a different kind and nature. It is not a question of quantity, but one of quality.

Then what is faith? Faith is that which has in it a principle of life. We may define a living faith by saying three things about it. Living faith is first conviction concerning the fact of God. It is secondly the experience of relationship with God. Thirdly and consequently, living faith is absolute submission to the will of God. Faith in God is far more than conviction that He exists. Thousands of people believe in the existence of God, but they have no living faith, no faith like a grain of mustard seed, with the principle of life and force at its very heart. There must be conviction of God, but there must also be relationship with Him, the going out of the soul towards Him in faith. That means-and here is the point of supreme emphasis-submission to Him. Jesus said to those men, If you have faith as a grain of mustard seed, you would say to that sycamine tree, Be rooted up, and be planted in the sea, and it should be done. There is no doubt that where He said this, there was a sycamine tree growing, and He pointed it out. There was another occasion when He used, not the sycamine tree, but something far bigger and bulkier-a mountain. It is the same thing, whether the tree planted in the soil near to them, or the mountain towering its head above Galilee. He said if we had faith as a grain of mustard seed, we would say to the tree, Be rooted up and planted in the sea; or we would say to a mountain, Be removed and be buried in the sea.

We ask, But is that so? Yes, if we have faith with the life principle in it. I am emphasizing a truth that is fundamental; first, conviction of God; secondly, relationship with God; and then obedience to God. We cannot exercise faith in God in doing anything that we do not know to be the will of God. We shall never say to a sycamine tree, Be rooted up and be planted in the sea, unless we know God wants that sycamine tree rooted up and planted there. We shall never say to a mountain, Be removed, and go into the sea, except we know it is God's will that mountain should be removed and cast into the sea.

That is where we break down in faith, and that is why we are still asking for an increase of faith, thinking if we had more, we should be better able to meet its demands. But no, it is a life principle, and that is belief in God, having relationship with Him, being submitted to Him.

Let us test our praying by that. We say, We have prayed, and we have believed in God, and we have relationship with Him; and we wanted this great mountain barring our way, removed. We want it moved, but we do not seem to have faith. Does God want it moved? Is it His will that the sycamine tree should be rooted up from the place where it is growing and flourishing, and perish in the waters of the sea? That is the supreme question. These men wanted more faith. He said, If ye had faith like that grain of mustard seed, with its life principle, that principle is always that of seeking and acting wholly and only within the will of God.

Then going on, without any break, our Lord said, "But who is there of you." One is halted for a moment to ask what He meant by this. There can be only one answer. We want more faith, so said the apostles, and so we would say. Why do we want more faith? We want a faith that will enable us to do these impossible things. Supposing we get it; what effect is that going to have on our own characters and natures and lives? There was an occasion when these men were sent out, and they came back with great rejoicing, because of the victories they had seen. Coming back rejoicing, they had said to Jesus, "Even the demons are subject unto us." He said to them, Do not rejoice in that. Do not be proud of that. Rejoice not that the demons are subject unto you. Rejoice rather that you are the burgesses of heaven from where Satan has already fallen.

Do we see the subtle peril that is revealed here? Any increase of faith producing the ability we think, to do great things, creates a peril for the soul, that of satisfaction in service, and the expectation that the service shall be recognized with reward. We sing,

"We will ask for no reward,  
Except to serve Thee still."

Do we mean it?

Yet here is a wonderful thing. Take that little parable, and then turn back a page or two in Luke, and with this parable of Jesus in mind, listen to Him. He was talking to servants who were faithful, and He said, "Blessed are those servants whom the Lord when He cometh shall find watching; verily I say unto you, that He shall gird Himself, and make them sit down to meat, and shall come and serve them." That is the very thing He had told them they had no right to expect, but He had already told them He would do. On the earthly level the lord of the slaves first secures his own meal and sustenance, and does not thank them because they are only doing their duty. Jesus said, That is your position so far as you are concerned. Yet He had already told them He would do that very thing; that at the last He would make them to sit down to meat, and come and serve them.

We should remember that action is completely of grace. We have no claim upon Him that is legal. We have no right of expectation on the basis of service for anything in the nature of reward. Yes, He will make us to sit down, He will gird Himself, and He will serve us; but even then, in the habitations of the blessed that lie beyond, when we enter into all that to which our loving hearts are looking forward, we shall never be allowed to forget that everything we receive is of His grace, our Lord and our Master. We are His servants. We ought to be and must be faithful; but do not let us look on and say, Now we have done very well; we are going to have a reward for this, and we are taking it. We have no right to expect it. We shall have it, but by His grace.