

KINGDOM.

LESSON 39

1	PRAYER
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Group leader. Pray for God’s guidance through his Spirit, for awareness of his presence and for listening to his voice. Commit your group and this lesson about preaching God’s kingdom to the Lord.

2	SHARING (20 minutes) [QUIET TIMES] JEREMIAH 1, 2, 4 and 10
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Take turns and share (or read from your notes) in short what you have learned from one of your quiet times with God out of the assigned Bible passages (Jeremiah 1, 2, 4 and 10). Listen to the person sharing, take him serious and accept him. Do not discuss what he shares. Take notes.

3	MEMORISATION (5 minutes) [GOD’S RESOURCES] (3) ISAIAH 41:10
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Review two by two.

(3) God’s strength. Isaiah 41:10. So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.

4	TEACHING (85 minutes) [THE PARABLES OF JESUS] THE UNWORTHY SERVANT
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**“The parable of the unworthy servant” in Luke 17:7-10 is a parable about
SERVICE IN GOD’S KINGDOM.**

“A parable” is an earthly story with a heavenly meaning. It is a true-to-life story or illustration designed to teach a spiritual truth. Jesus used the commonplace and the events of everyday to illumine the mysteries of the kingdom of God and to confront people with the reality of their situation and their need for renewal. We will study these parables by using the six guidelines for studying parables (See manual 9, supplement 1).

Read Luke 17:7-10.

1. Understand the natural story of the parable.

Introduce. The parable is told in figurative language and the spiritual meaning of the parable is based on that. Therefore we will first study the words and the cultural and historical facts of the background of the story.

Discuss. What are the true-to-life elements of the story?

Notes.

Master and slave. The story describes the typical relationship between servants or slaves and their masters in the days of Jesus. The story is about the owner of a small farm. This farmer has only one slave or servant. This slave or servant is pictured as doing what he has been ordered to do. The master gives him no credit for what he does and also does not thank him for what he does.

Jesus told the story in the form of several questions, in order to force his hearers to think. The first question is, “Who among you, if you have a servant, ... will wait on him?” The expected answer is “No, he will not wait on him”.

The second question is, “Will he not order him to do this and that?” The expected answer is “Yes, he will order him to do this and that”.

The third question is, “Does he thank the servant because he did what he had been ordered to do?” The expected answer is “No, he will not thank him”.

2. Examine the immediate context and determine the elements of the parable.

Introduce. The context of “the story” of the parable may consist of “the setting” and “the explanation or application” of the parable. The setting of the parable may state the *occasion* for telling the parable, or describe *the circumstances* at the time of telling the parable. The setting is usually found *before* the story of the parable and the explanation or application is usually found *after* the story of the parable.

Discover and discuss. What is the setting, the story and the explanation or application of this parable?

Notes.

(1) The setting of the parable is contained in Luke 17:1-6,11-19.

It consists of three parts: a serious warning, a great encouragement and a contrasting example. Jesus was teaching his disciples and there were also other people who listened to what he taught (e.g. Pharisees, Luke 16:1,14; 17:20). The serious warning is not only addressed to Christians, but also to non-Christians.

The serious warning is about causing another person to sin (Luke 17:1-4). In Luke 16, Jesus had warned people about going to hell. Hell is a terrible place (Luke 16:23-24), and once a person is there, escape is impossible (Luke 16:26-31)! Therefore, people should be on their guard, lest through their words and actions other people are led astray and perish forever (Luke 17:1). Temptations (seductions) are bound to come, because it is in the very nature of sin to spread. But it is a terrible thing to be the deliberate cause of temptation! It is a very terrible thing if a person causes even the least of Christ's disciples to sin, that is, to deliberately place any kind of trap in his path that would entice him to sin. Jesus places a prophetic curse ("woe") on all people who deliberately tempt others to sin and do not repent from their evil. Think of what Jesus said in Matthew 13:41 about people who cause sin and do evil. This sin of deliberately tempting others to sin is regarded as very serious, because it was through deliberate seduction (temptation) by the devil that sin entered the human world (Genesis 3:1-6). And it is through seductions (temptations) that sin continues to spread in the human world (1 Timothy 6:9-10). Neither God's eternal decrees nor the facts of history offer any excuse for the terrible sin of deliberately enticing (seducing, tempting) others to do wrong (Luke 22:22; Acts 2:23).

Also Christians must be on their guard, lest by their careless words and actions show that they belong to the *evil world* that strives to lure God's children into sin (Matthew 18:7). Any person, who realises that he is tempting others into sin by what he says or does, must take radical measures to eradicate this evil (Matthew 18:6,8-9). Although it is impossible to eradicate temptations to sin, by God's grace it is possible to prevent oneself from belonging to the group of people who deliberately tempt others into sin (Psalm 1:1; 1 Corinthians 10:13).

Therefore, a Christian should constantly watch over his own life. He should be on his guard not to deliberately cause another person to stumble into sin (Luke 17:1-3). He should live his life in dependence on Christ (John 15:5), often ask the Holy Spirit to convict him of any sin in his life that needs repentance (John 16:8) and be humble when others point out something that is wrong in his life. Christians should also watch over one another's life. If a Christian commits a sin, then he should be reprovved (Matthew 18:15-17). If he repents, he should be forgiven (Luke 17:3-4). Just as it is wrong for anyone to deliberately entice another person into sin, so also it is wrong not to forgive a person when he repents of his sin. This process of reprovving sin and forgiving the repentant sinner should never be relinquished (Luke 17:4). Simply judging or condemning one another is prohibited (Matthew 7:1-2), but in contrast, rebuking one another when necessary is commanded (Luke 17:3; 1 Corinthians 5:9-13). When the sinner triumphs by repenting of his sin, the person who has been wronged should triumph by forgiving him and by being merciful to him (Luke 17:3-4; James 2:12-13).

The great encouragement is about faith that accomplishes God's tasks (Lukas 17:5-6). In order to steer clear from causing others to sin and always to be ready to forgive, requires God's courage, strength and love! And receiving God's courage, strength and love requires faith! Believing that such courage, strength and love would be given to them in answer to their prayers required more faith than the disciples of Jesus felt they had (Luke 17:5). But Jesus encouraged them and us not to get disheartened.

Faith, no matter how small it may be, will grow as we exercise it! No task, which God or Christ assigns, will be impossible for us to accomplish, as long as we remain in a trustful (faith) relationship with God (Luke 17:6). We must believe that for every command that God gives to us, he also gives courage, strength and love to us so that we are able to accomplish whatever God commands. What is important is not the amount of our faith, but rather that we have such a faith-relationship with Christ. Genuine faith, however small, will grow when it is exercised or used.

In the present context, Christ assigns the following tasks to us: to steer clear from being a deliberate tempter and to always be ready to forgive those people who sin against us. Although these tasks are extremely difficult, with God's courage, strength and love they can be accomplished. This is what we must *believe!* The lepers in Luke 17:11-19 responded in faith to the assignment Christ gave to them and Christ healed them on the way. Their faith in Christ was so strong that they acted on what he said before they even saw the evidence that it would work (cf. Luke 7:1-10).

The contrasting example is about the attitude of the Samaritan leper. The first issue is that the disciples are warned that they are *responsible* that their service may not cause other people to stumble into sin. The second issue is that the disciples are encouraged that their *faith* will cause them to accomplish every task that God assigns to them. But a third issue remains, namely the question, "With what spirit will the disciples go out and serve God in their various tasks?" That question is answered in the parable of the unworthy servant in Luke 17:7-10 and in the contrasting example that follows the parable in Luke 17:11-19. Luke describes how ten lepers, who did what Jesus told them to do, were healed, but only one of them returned to thank the Lord. It is possible that this event describes exactly the opposite spirit of that which is described in the parable of the unworthy servant.

(2) The story of the parable is contained in Luke 17:7-9.

(3) The explanation or application of the parable is contained in Luke 17:10.

Jesus says, “So *you* also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, ‘We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.’” The explanation or application does not concern the master, but the servant. The servant in the story of the parable did what he was told to do. And in the explanation or application, when the disciples have done everything what they were told to do, they should say to themselves that they are unworthy servants who have done their duty.

The key words in the explanation are “being unworthy servants” (Greek: *douloi achreioi*) and “doing one’s duty”. Due to the lack of more information in the context, there are two possible explanations or applications of this parable. Both explanations (or applications) are concerned with *the attitude or spirit with which the servant serves*.

The first explanation emphasises serving with the attitude and spirit of a slave. In the story of the parable, the servant does *only* what he is told to do. Although nothing is wrong with his obedience, something is wrong with his attitude in serving! He only does something when he is told to do it. The continuing orders to the servant could imply that the servant was waiting for new orders. *The spirit of a slave* has taken possession of him, that is, he only does his duty, no less and certainly no more. After he has completed his task, he waits until his master gives him a new task. Out of himself, he takes no initiative to serve. He is a coldly calculating slave, who is *determined only to do the minimum or the letter of the law*. His heart is not in his serving. With a slavish spirit he performs his duties. There is no spirit of wholeheartedness, no diligence, no gratitude, and no joy in his service. No wonder that the master does not thank him for doing what he is told to do!

The application of this parable would then be that *if* Christians serve like this coldly calculating servant, by doing only what they are told to do and no more, then such Christians should say to themselves that they are not worthy of any thanks, because they have done nothing more than their duty. They should regard their service as unworthy of receiving any praise, commendation or reward from their master, because they have done nothing more than what was expected of them.

When Christians serve in God’s kingdom, they should drop this spirit or attitude of a slave. Their service should be wholehearted, diligent and above the ordinary. As Jesus says in Matthew 5:20, “Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven” (cf. Matthew 5:47-48).

Luke thus contrasts the spirit of the unworthy servant in the parable with the spirit of the Samaritan leper who was healed. The unworthy servant only did his duty (Luke 17:7-10), while the Samaritan did more than his duty (Luke 17:11-19). Although Jesus had healed ten lepers, only the Samaritan returned to thank and praise God for his healing. All ten lepers had done their duty, that is, they had done what Jesus had ordered them to do. But only one of them had done more than what Jesus had ordered them to do. He had freely come back to thank and praise God! In this parable, Jesus is attacking the legalistic attitude in service. Christians should serve God wholeheartedly and diligently by doing more than just their duty.

The second explanation emphasises serving with a spirit of humility. In the story of the parable, the servant does what he is told. Although nothing is wrong with his obedience, something is wrong with his attitude in serving! The questions in the story could imply that the servant expected some kind of credit or reward for his service. *The spirit of pride and an exaggerated self-esteem* has taken possession of him, that is, he expects something of his master for his service. He argues that his master could have given him credit for working hard all day long and could have acknowledged that he also needed some rest and relaxation at the end of the day. Or the master could have thanked him for his service. This servant could have thought that he is doing *more than his duty* and that *he is worthy* of a better treatment or even worthy of some kind of reward! *If* the servant had such thoughts, he would have been spiritually proud and would have thought too highly of himself.

The application of this parable would then be that when Christians obey God, they should say to themselves that they are not worthy of any commendation, credit or reward for doing their duty. They should regard their service as a privilege and not as something deserving a reward of some kind. Christians do not deserve extra credit for obeying or serving God. Obedience is not something extra we do, but is an inseparable part of faith and our duty. In this parable, Jesus is not rendering our service as meaningless or useless, nor is he doing away with rewards. But Jesus is attacking unwarranted self-esteem and spiritual pride. Christians should serve God with a spirit of humility without expecting a reward.

3. Identify the relevant and irrelevant details of the parable.

Introduce. Jesus did not intend every detail in the story of the parable to have some spiritual significance. Parables are not allegories. The relevant details are those details in the story of the parable that reinforce the central point or main theme or lesson of the parable. Therefore, we should not ascribe independent spiritual significance to every detail of the story of the parable.

Teach. In this parable, Jesus does not give any of the details any particular meaning.

4. Identify the main message of the parable.

Introduce. The main message (the central theme) of the parable is found either in the explanation or application or from the story itself. From the way Jesus Christ himself explained or applied the parables, we know how we should interpret parables. A parable normally has only one main lesson, one central point to make. Therefore, we should not try to find a spiritual truth in every detail of the story, but instead look for the one main lesson.

Discuss. What is the main message of this parable?

Notes.

The parable of the unworthy servant in Luke 17:7-10 teaches about “service in God’s kingdom”.

The main message of the parable may be the following. “Christians should strive to be worthy servants, who do more than just their duty”. Christians should not serve with the spirit of a slave, doing grudgingly only what they are told to do. They should serve with a free spirit, doing willingly, wholeheartedly and gladly more than what they are told to do (1 Peter 5:2). They serve in a spirit of love and gratitude. A slavish spirit receives no recommendation in God’s kingdom.

Or the main message of the parable may be the following. “Christians should regard themselves as unworthy servants, who do their duty.” Christians should not serve with a spirit of pride, thinking that they are worthy of commendation, credit or reward for doing what they are told to do. They should regard service as a privilege, without expecting credit for their obedience. They serve in a spirit of humility. A proud spirit gains no recommendation in God’s kingdom (cf. 1 Peter 5:5-6).

Service is one of the basic characteristics of God’s kingdom! The genuine people of God’s kingdom serve by gladly doing more than they are told to do and serve without expecting commendation, credit or reward for their service.

5. Compare the parable with parallel and contrasting passages in the Bible.

Introduce. Some parables are similar to one another and can be compared. However, the truth in all the parables has parallel or contrasting truth taught in other passages of the Bible. Try to find the most important cross-references that help us to interpret the parable. Always check the interpretation of a parable with the direct clear teaching of the Bible.

Discover and discuss. How does what each of these Bible passages teach compare to what the parable of the unworthy servant teaches?

(1) The worthless servant and the unworthy servant.

Read Matthew 25:30. The same word “worthless slave” (Greek: achreion doulon) in the original is used in these two Bible passages. The servant in Matthew 25:30 was a *worthless or useless* servant, because he did absolutely nothing with his entrusted task. The worthless servant was thrown in hell.

But the servant in Luke 17:10 was an *unworthy or miserable* servant, because he did no more than he was ordered to do. The unworthy servant simply received no commendation from his master.

(2) The extra-ordinary servant.

Read Matthew 5:20,23-24,40-48. This is a comparison between the parable and the Sermon on the Mount. In Matthew 5:20 Jesus says, “Unless your righteousness *surpasses* that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.” The kingdom of God is characterised not by the ordinary, but by the extra-ordinary. The people of God’s kingdom do more than the ordinary. They do more than just their duty.

For example, in Matthew 5:23-48, “the ordinary” is to refrain from murder and even from getting angry, which is regarded as spiritual murder. But “the extra-ordinary” is to go and reconcile yourself with everyone who might have something against you! “The ordinary” is to be fair and just and repay sinners with a just punishment. But “the extra-ordinary” is not to resist an evil person, and instead to tolerate his maltreatment! “The ordinary” is to walk one mile carrying the pack of a foreign soldier when he forces you to do so. But “the extra-ordinary” is to do more than he demands and walk two miles instead of one! “The ordinary” is to give whatever a person asks of you. But “the extra-ordinary” is to give him more than he demands! “The ordinary” is to greet your brothers, to love those who love you and to do good to those who do good to you. But Jesus asks, “What are you doing more than others?” (Matthew 5:47).

“The extra-ordinary” is to greet strangers, to love your enemies, to do good to those who hate you, to bless those who curse you and to pray for those who mistreat or persecute you (Luke 6:27-28). Jesus expects Christians to do more than the religious leaders and teachers (the Pharisees) or the Gentiles (humanists) do. The people of God’s kingdom are characterised by doing “the extra-ordinary”, by doing much more than their duty, even their religious duty. And they do all this with a spirit of wholehearted freedom and overflowing generosity.

(3) The grateful servant.

Read Luke 17:11-19. This is a comparison between the parable and the section, which follows immediately after the parable. In Luke 17:11-19 Jesus asks, “Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine people? Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?” All ten lepers had done their duty: they had done exactly what Jesus had ordered them to do. But only one of them had done more than he had been ordered to do. He returned to Jesus, praising God with a loud voice and humbly thanking Jesus for what Jesus had done for him! He did exactly the opposite of the coldly calculating servant. He did more than he was told to do! He did more than his duty. He had freely come back to thank and praise God! Likewise, the people of God’s kingdom do more than Jesus tells them to do. And they do all this with a spirit of praise and gratitude.

(4) The humble servant.

Read Luke 12:37; 22:27. This is a comparison between the parable and Jesus’ own example. In the parable of the watchful servants in Luke 12:37, Jesus promises, “It will be good for those servants whose master finds them watching when he comes. I tell you the truth, he will dress himself to serve, will have them recline at the table and will come and wait on them”. And in Luke 22:27, Jesus says, “Who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who is at the table? But I am among you as one who serves.” In his personal example, Jesus never contradicted himself. He practised what he preached. He preached service and he practised service. In John 13, he washed the feet of his disciples and said, “I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you” (John 13:15). Likewise, the people of God’s kingdom serve with a spirit of humility and with a spirit of setting an example to other people.

(5) The sincere servant.

Read Colossians 3:22-24. In Colossians 3:22-24, Paul warns Christian servants or slaves not to just obey their masters when they are looking, in order to win their favour. He exhorts them to serve in a spirit of sincerity and reverence for the Lord. Likewise, the people of God’s kingdom do everything they do wholeheartedly as if they are doing it for the Lord. And they do all this in a spirit of sincerity and reverence for the Lord.

6. A summary of the main teachings or lessons of the parables about service in God’s kingdom.

Read. The parables about stewardship are the parable of the unworthy servant in Luke 17:7-10 and the parable of the faithful and unfaithful servants in Matthew 24:45-51 and Luke 12:42-46.

Discuss. What are the main teachings or lessons of the parables about service in God’s kingdom? What did Jesus Christ teach us to *know* or to *believe* and what did he teach us to *be* or to *do*?

Notes.

(1) All people must know what God or Jesus Christ is like.

Jesus Christ himself was a Servant among us. He did not come to be served, but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:45). Jesus Christ has entrusted each Christian with certain tasks and responsibilities in which he should serve. At his second coming, he will certainly judge people according to either their cold-hearted calculations or according to their wholehearted spirit of doing more than just their duty. He will judge them according to their faithfulness or unfaithfulness.

(2) Christians must know what they should be like.

Every Christian has the duty to be faithful to the task that Jesus Christ has given him to do on this earth. Not only Christian leaders or teachers, but also every Christian has an assigned task and Jesus Christ expects him to be faithful. Besides any specific task, every Christian is expected to do the will of the Master and to care for the people in need. At his second coming, Jesus Christ will assign to each faithful Christian certain specific tasks in the new heaven and new earth (Luke 19:17,19). He will say, “Well done, my good servant! Because you have been trustworthy in a small matter, take charge of ten cities.” Each task on the present earth and on the new earth will be in harmony with the servant’s individuality and with his faithfulness while still on earth.

The talents (abilities/chances) which God gives, must be utilized and developed (Matthew 25:15) and one must make most of the time (Ephesians 5:16). No one has the right to be lazy. “If a man will not work, he shall not eat” (2 Thessalonians 3:10). No one has the right to live for himself alone (Luke 9:23). “So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God” (1 Corinthians 10:31). “I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some” (1 Corinthians 9:22).

Christians are called “God’s fellow workers” (1 Corinthians 3:5-9). What a great privilege it is to know that everyone of God’s servants has been given a specific task to fulfil in the total of God’s work on earth!

But when Christians serve, they should not serve with the spirit of a slave, doing grudgingly only what they are told to do. A slavish spirit gains no promotion in God’s kingdom. Christians should serve with a free spirit, doing willingly, wholeheartedly and gladly more than what they are told to do. They serve in a spirit of love, praise and gratitude. They serve in a spirit of humility, not looking for commendation, credit or reward. And they serve in a spirit of sincerity and reverence for the Lord. They serve people on earth as if they are serving the Lord. *The kingdom of God is characterised*

not by the ordinary, but by the extra-ordinary. The people of God's kingdom do more than just their duty. They do more than the ordinary. Christians are characterised by doing the extra-ordinary! They do what others cannot do or do not want to do, yet needs to be done.

5	PRAYER (8 minutes)	[REACTIONS] PRAYER IN RESPONSE TO GOD'S WORD
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Take turns in the group *to pray short* to God in response to what you have learned today.
Or divide the group into two's or three's and pray to God in response to what you have learned today.

6	PREPARATION (2 minutes)	[ASSIGNMENT] FOR NEXT LESSON
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(Group leader. Give the group members this preparation for at home in writing or let them copy it down).

1. Commitment. Be committed to make disciples, build the Church and preach the kingdom.
2. Preach, teach or study "the unworthy servant" together with another person or group of people.
3. Personal time with God. Have a quiet time from half a chapter of **Jeremiah 15, 17, 18 and 23** each day.
Make use of the favourite truth method. Make notes.
4. Memorisation. (4) God's wisdom. **James 1:5.** Daily review the last 5 memorised Bible verses.
5. Bible study. Prepare the next Bible study at home. **Romans 12:1-21.**
Make use of the five steps method of Bible study. Make notes.
6. Prayer. Pray for someone or something specific this week and see what God is doing (Psalm 5:3).
7. Update your notebook on preaching God's kingdom. Include your notes on quiet time, your memorisation notes, your teaching notes and this preparation.