

慈父或惡主 Loving Father or Cruel Master

Luke 16:5–10

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Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost

ATPC

In our faith, we often call God our Father because Jesus told the parable of the prodigal son in Luke 15. That story reminds us that God is like a loving father who willingly bears the foolishness of his children, always waiting for our return, eager to bless us with the best gifts. Yet, today, Jesus gives a shocking teaching: we are “worthless servants,” undeserving of thanks or even the privilege of eating at the same table. In these three weeks, we will read Luke 17–18 and reflect on what kind of relationship Jesus teaches us to have with God.

Context

Luke 17 is part of a series of teachings Jesus gives as he leads his disciples on the road toward Jerusalem. By this point, the disciples—after hearing Jesus’ challenging teachings for several days—may have felt anxious or discouraged, realizing how hard it was to live up to his standards. So they say to him, “Increase our faith!” (Luke 17:5). At first, that sounds like a good and humble request—but Jesus’ response surprises them. Instead of performing a miracle to strengthen their faith or offering comforting words, Jesus rebukes them sharply, saying their faith is smaller than a mustard seed, as if hinting that they have accomplished nothing.

Then Jesus continues with an even more uncomfortable lesson. He compares the disciples to servants and says: “Who among you would say to your servant who has just come in from plowing or tending sheep in the field, ‘Come here at once and take your place at the table’? Would you not rather say to him, ‘Prepare supper for me, put on your apron and serve me while I eat and drink; later you may eat and drink’? Do you thank the servant for doing what was commanded? So you also, when you have done all that you were ordered to do, say, ‘We are worthless servants; we have done only what we ought to have done.’” (Luke 17:7–10)

Such words are hard to hear. How could Jesus, who only two chapters earlier described God as a merciful father running to embrace the lost son (15:11–32), now speak of us as “worthless servants”?

The longing for a loving father

In the parable of the prodigal son, even though the son is reckless and ungrateful, the father still grants him his inheritance, waits daily for his return, and throws a feast when he comes home. We all hope God is like that—giving us freedom, forgiving our mistakes, and welcoming us into abundant life. But because Jesus knows the desires of our hearts, he uses the “parable of the servant” to warn us against turning that longing into a dangerous illusion. When we look closely at the disciples’ attitudes, it’s not hard to see how easily that illusion can form.

We often imagine that the twelve disciples followed Jesus out of deep wisdom and insight. But perhaps some of them did not truly understand what he was teaching. Maybe they followed him with mistaken expectations. After all, who would keep following a teacher who predicts his own capture and death (9:44, 22) unless they expected some worldly reward? Many probably hoped Jesus would lead a revolution to establish God’s kingdom for the Jewish people—a material, political kingdom where they could hold positions of honor (9:46). Instead, Jesus spoke of suffering and death as the first realities they would face.

This kind of misguided faith is not foreign to us. In Taiwanese folk religion, much worship is built upon a “transactional” mindset: people pray to gods to receive blessings in return—wealth, safety, relationships, or success. Even the respect shown to ancestors often stems more from the hope for protection and fortune than from sincere remembrance. Such logic: “if I worship you, you should bless me” turns faith into a calculated exchange, stripping it of moral beauty and reducing it to a formula for personal gain.

Christian faith can fall into the same trap. God’s promises of abundance sound so attractive that we easily imagine ourselves enjoying those blessings. Perhaps that is why Jesus urges us to “count the cost” of discipleship (14:25–33). The disciples may have thought of it as a high-return investment—follow Jesus now, and reap great rewards later. Out of this kind of thinking, modern “prosperity theology” emerged: the belief that faithful attendance, prayer, and especially generous giving will bring a hundredfold blessing. Who wouldn’t want to believe in such a profitable religion?

A teaching that shatters illusions

Jesus' teaching cuts directly through that illusion. When the disciples ask for more faith, who knows how many of them are really asking for the faith to stay invested until their heavenly profits arrive? Jesus' stern tone reminds us: following him is not a transaction to earn divine rewards. No one can buy eternal life with devotion or good works. If God were only a gentle father, wouldn't the clever younger son just repeat his old behavior—taking more of the inheritance and wasting it again?

During the Reformation, Martin Luther made a similar point with his doctrine of *sola gratia* (grace alone). Seeing how the Roman Church exploited the poor by selling indulgences to fund St. Peter's Basilica, Luther proclaimed that salvation comes solely by God's grace, not by human deeds, merit, or even church authority.

In the twentieth century, theologian Karl Barth carried this further. He explained, "Faith is not a human act, but an act of God within the human being. It is an event in which a person is taken up into the movement of God's grace." For Barth, even our faith is not something we initiate—it is God's own grace at work within us.

Job's young companion Elihu made the same point: "If you sin, what do you accomplish against him? ... If you are righteous, what do you give to him? Or what does he receive from your hand?" (Job 35:6–7). God delights in our righteousness not because God *needs* it to be complete, and our sin cannot diminish God's glory. Seen this way, Jesus' portrayal of God as a demanding master does not deny our worth; it emphasizes God's sovereignty. Our value is not diminished—but God's grace is of infinite worth, far beyond what we could ever earn or exchange for. Everything we have is already a gift freely given.

A loving father or a harsh master?

This does not mean we cannot ask God for anything. It means we must examine our motives carefully—are we seeking God's will or merely our own benefit? God does promise abundant life, but not as a result of religious bargaining. God gives freely to whom God chooses.

Nor does this teaching make our lives meaningless. On the contrary, it calls us to live faithfully, imitating Christ and embodying the grace we have freely received. The meaning of our lives is not something we measure by human effort or wisdom, but something God

graciously imparts.

So is God ultimately a generous Father or a severe Master? The answer depends on our own hearts. Why are we following Jesus? If our faith is motivated by the hope of blessings, forgiveness, peace, or a guaranteed ticket to heaven, then we may hear God saying: “Prepare supper for me; put on your apron and serve me while I eat and drink; later you may eat and drink” (17:8)—and afterward, “We are worthless servants; we have done only what we ought to have done” (17:10).

There is an ancient Greek fable about a farmer who found a statue of a god and set it up in his home, praying daily for wealth. When nothing happened, he grew angry and smashed the statue—only to find gold coins hidden inside. If our faith is like that farmer’s—treating God as an ATM to withdraw blessings—then we are not worshiping the true God of Jesus Christ, but a false idol of our own making.

If we forget God’s side as the strict master, we risk turning grace into a cheap commodity to be sold and exploited. If we forget God’s side as the loving Father, faith becomes an unreachable ideal, leaving us hopeless and condemned. Only when we hold both truths together—God as our merciful Father and sovereign Lord—can we follow Jesus with a healthy and faithful heart.

Let us pray: *Gracious and loving Lord, through Jesus’ parable of the prodigal son, you have shown us your mercy and compassion. Through his ministry of forgiveness, you have given us faith and courage to seek you even while we were still sinners. Yet, Lord, through today’s teaching, you remind us how easily we can approach you with the wrong attitude—turning worship into self-interest.*

Keep our hearts alert, O God. Deliver us from treating you as an idol or cheapening your priceless grace with the false logic of exchange. Do not let your severity discourage us, but rather help us live each day as witnesses to the immeasurable gift of your grace—a treasure beyond all striving. We pray in the name of the triune God: the Lord of authority and glory, our patient teacher Jesus Christ, and the Spirit who continually shapes our lives. Amen.