

Historical Commentary



Seventeenth Sunday of Trinitytide - Year C

The Liturgy Letter

Commentary on Luke 17:5-10 / Selections from Church Fathers and John Calvin

Cyril of Alexandria: The power that comes to us through faith is of God. Knowing this, blessed Paul also says in the first epistle to the Corinthians, “For to one is given through the Spirit the word of wisdom, to another the word of knowledge according to the same Spirit, and to another faith in the same Spirit.” You see that he has placed faith also in the catalogue of spiritual graces. The disciples requested that they might receive this from the Savior, contributing also what was of themselves. By the descent upon them of the Holy Spirit, he granted it to them after the fulfillment of the dispensation. Before the resurrection, their faith was so feeble that they were liable even to the charge of being “little of faith.”

Augustine: A mustard seed looks small. Nothing is less noteworthy to the sight, but nothing is stronger to the taste. What does that signify but the very great fervor and inner strength of faith in the church?

Ambrose: You do not say to your servant, “Sit down,” but require more service from him and do not thank him. The Lord also does not allow only one work or labor for you, because so long as we live we must always work.

Know that you are a servant overwhelmed by very much obedience. You must not set yourself first, because you are called a son of God. Grace must be acknowledged, but nature not overlooked. Do not boast of yourself if you have served well, as you should have done. The sun obeys, the moon complies, and the angels serve.... Let us not require praise from ourselves nor prevent the judgment of God and anticipate the sentence of the Judge but reserve it for its own time and Judge.

Chrysostom: He said, “When you have done everything, say, ‘We are unprofitable servants,’ ” to warn them in his wish that they keep themselves at great distance from that destructive passion. Dearly beloved, see how the person with his mouth open for human glory and performing the works of virtue on that account has no benefit from it. Despite practicing every example of virtue, if he seems to give himself credit for it, he ends up empty-handed and bereaved of everything.

John Calvin: The object of this parable is to show that God claims all that belongs to us as his property, and possesses an entire control over our persons and services; and, therefore, that all the zeal that may be manifested by us in discharging our duty does not lay him under obligation to us by any sort of merit; for, as we are his property, so he on his part can owe us nothing. He adduces the comparison of a servant, who, after having spent the day in severe toil, returns home in the evening, and continues his labors till his master is pleased to relieve him. Christ speaks not of such servants as we have in the present day, who work for hire, but of the slaves that lived in ancient times, whose condition in society was such, that they gained nothing for themselves, but all that belonged to them—their toil, and application, and industry, even to their very blood—was the property of their masters. Christ now shows that a bond of servitude not less rigorous binds and obliges us to serve God; from which he infers, that we have no means of laying Him under obligations to us.

It is an argument drawn from the less to the greater; for if a mortal man is permitted to hold such power over another man, as to enjoin upon him uninterrupted services by night and by day, and yet contract no sort of mutual obligation, as if he were that man’s debtor, how much more shall God have a right to demand the services of our whole life, to the utmost extent that our ability allows, and yet be in no degree indebted to us? We see then that all are held guilty of wicked arrogance who imagine that they deserve anything from God, or that he is bound to them in any way. And yet no crime is more generally practiced than this kind of arrogance; for there is no man that would not willingly call God to account, and hence the notion of merits has prevailed in almost every age.

But we must attend more closely to the statement made by Christ, that we render nothing to God beyond what he has a right to claim, but are so strongly bound to his service, that

we owe him everything that lies in our power. It consists of two clauses. First, our life, even to the very end of our course, belongs entirely to God; so that, if a person were to spend a part of it in obedience to God, he would have no right to bargain that he should rest for the remainder of the time; as a considerable number of men, after serving as soldiers for ten years, would gladly apply for a discharge. Then follows the second clause, on which we have already touched, that God is not bound to pay us hire for any of our services. Let each of us remember, that he has been created by God for the purpose of laboring, and of being vigorously employed in his work; and that not only for a limited time, but till death itself, and, what is more, that he shall not only live, but die, to God, (Romans 14:8.)

With respect to merit, we must remove the difficulty by which many are perplexed; for Scripture so frequently promises a reward to our works, that they think it allows them some merit. The reply is easy. A reward is promised, not as a debt, but from the mere good pleasure of God. It is a great mistake to suppose that there is a mutual relation between Reward and Merit; for it is by his own undeserved favor, and not by the value of our works, that God is induced to reward them. By the engagements of the Law, I readily acknowledge, God is bound to men, if they were to discharge fully all that is required from them; but still, as this is a voluntary obligation, it remains a fixed principle, that man can demand nothing from God, as if he had merited any thing. And thus the arrogance of the flesh falls to the ground; for, granting that any man fulfilled the Law, he cannot plead that he has any claims on God, having done no more than he was bound to do. When he says that we are unprofitable servants, his meaning is, that God receives from us nothing beyond what is justly due but only collects the lawful revenues of his dominion.

There are two principles, therefore, that must be maintained: first, that God naturally owes us nothing, and that all the services which we render to him are not worth a single straw; secondly, that, according to the engagements of the Law, a reward is attached to works, not on account of their value, but because God is graciously pleased to become our debtor. It would evince intolerable ingratitude, if on such a ground any person should indulge in proud vaunting. The kindness and liberality which God exercises towards us are so far from giving us a right to swell with foolish confidence, that we are only laid under deeper obligations to Him. Whenever we meet with the word reward, or whenever it occurs to our recollection, let us look upon this as the crowning act of the goodness of God to us, that, though we are completely in his debt, he condescends to enter into a bargain

with us. So much the more detestable is the invention of the Sophists, who have had the effrontery to forge a kind of merit, which professes to be founded on a just claim. The word merit, taken by itself, was sufficiently profane and inconsistent with the standard of piety; but to intoxicate men with diabolical pride, as if they could merit any thing by a just claim, is far worse.