

*“But which of you having a servant plowing (ploughing) or feeding cattle will say unto him by and by, when he is come from the field, Go and sit down to meat? And will not rather say unto him, make ready wherewith I may sup, and gird thyself and serve me, till I have eaten and drunken, and afterward thou shalt eat and drink? Doth he thank that servant because he did the things that were commanded him? I trow (trust) not. So likewise ye, when ye shall have done all those things which are commanded you say, We are unprofitable servants; we have done that which is our duty to do.”*

This parable is not explicitly stated as being one, as many are. It is unique to the gospel of Luke and is not therefore found in other gospels. It is not included in all lists of parables which scholars have drawn up.

The genuineness of this normal domestic set up is often bypassed today in this age of labour-saving devices and modern lifestyles. However to the ancient world we can see that the use of servants was a much more common occurrence and experience. Most families who were not poor had domestic assistance. It provided jobs in society and gave a degree of security to those who were struggling and needed some means of putting food on the table. It sounds ungracious for the master to expect to be served by others, but this was the pre-agreed stance of their relationship. There was to be no thanks proffered instead an expectation. This is entirely reasonable. It was thanks enough that the servant had the opportunity of eating later at the expense of the owner of the household. Why should the master thank the servant? If anything the servant should be thankful to the master, but we rebel against that notion, as naturally we envisage ourselves as the servant slaving away not the master who orders others around to suit his requirements.

Who is the master who orders the servant? A parable has set features which teach through application to detail and are not just moral stories which have generic lessons which vaguely convey truths without a burning focus. They are layered pictures which use precise data which has been divinely selected down to every jot and tittle rather than a broadly painted scene which can be re-expressed to suit the individual's taste or cultural background.

The master in context appears to be Jesus himself, as he is teaching his disciples, the apostles, about various important topics, verses 1 & 5. This was in the north as he passed through the midst of Samaria and Galilee from there on his way to Jerusalem, verse 11. He had taught about the certainty of offences, and the punishment for committing them, and also the need for forgiveness, and the requirement to have strong faith. There was a warning given – *“take heed to yourselves”*. In other passages the absolute need to forgive others if we desire to be forgiven ourselves is explicitly taught, see Matthew 6v14,15.

Is the idea here the need to regard keeping the commandments as the bare minimum of rendering service to Jesus? That despite the reluctance to actually take action rather than just believe, that Jesus is looking for more from us? We are so bad at keeping these commandments, it seems that the notion of disciples dismissing their contribution if they did so, as this was our duty, and that they had been unprofitable to him and therefore like an embarrassment. Is the extra element that goes beyond the

striving to keep the commandments is the expression of love towards others of forgiveness because of faith in God's divine plan and His construction of the creation which He has made in a particular way to bring out certain responses in His children?

Clearly the servants are to be identified with the disciples. This is explicitly stated "So likewise ye", so that is not in any doubt. The ploughing or feeding cattle could be a reference to the wider responsibilities of the master. He cares for God's creation and fulfils the basic requirement given to mankind of which he is a central figure seen in Genesis 1v28 *"Be fruitful and multiply and plenish (there is no re) the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the fowl of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth"*.

Is there also an oblique reference to the honouring of the Lord Jesus Christ at his promised return by these said servants who are only present at that time of feasting and celebration because of the victory which their master has previously achieved. A good master having earned his riches shares it with discrimination, not arbitrarily, on the basis of service rendered.

If we have the mindset of demanding from the master grace as we interpret it, then we will be just as disappointed as the servant who loses his position because he thinks he should be treated better than he deserves. When we question what we deserve then we are truly grateful for any and all blessings which come our way.

The word "Unprofitable" is used in Philemon v11 in the context of domestic service where Onesimus the freed slave is sent back to his former master.

In Romans 3v12 it speaks of people becoming unprofitable because they have gone out of the way and man's general lack of ability to do good.

Matthew 25v30 speaks of the unprofitable servant being cast into outer darkness a sad theme which Jesus would expressly take up when he got to Jerusalem.

This raises the question do we ever ask ourselves whether or not we are profitable to our master in any sense? How do we value ourselves and what is the basis of such considerations? It is thinking in a direction which is not often pursued. We are not worthless individuals although none have others in service to ourselves as we are required to render service to God and His Christ.