

## KEEPING GOING WHEN THE GAS RUNS OUT

Luke 17: 1-10

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### Happy ... to be last!

*Understanding Servanthood – a key to persevering in the ministry, to keeping going when you're getting nothing out*

### Introduction

Today it's easy to give up. People stick to very little. Commitment is weak. In the West especially, we've become so used to convenience and instant gratification, that even a little hardship is just not acceptable. We avoid it at all cost. Ease, comfort, safety – we'll take that "to go" no problem, but hardship, pain, danger – we skip right over those on the menu. Like children we just want to jump straight to the dessert in life and skip right over the veggies. As John Piper notes of America, 'When historians list the character traits of America in the last third of the twentieth century, commitment, constancy, tenacity, endurance, patience, resolve, and perseverance will not be on the list. The list will begin with an all consuming interest in self-esteem. It will be followed by the sub-headings of self-assertiveness, self-enhancement, and self-realization.'

This me, myself and I, and superficiality has crept into the church. We need to be realistic about how easily we become children of our times. How conditioned we are by the world.

And perhaps, this has made us as ministers soft, given us the wrong expectations, made us lose sight of what a servant is. This world we are living in must be clouding our ideas of servanthood.

So, the Scripture before us today, is a startling reminder of what being a servant is really about. It shakes the dust off servanthood that's probably been sitting on the shelf for sometime now.

And as we understand again what it truly means to be a servant, we find therein a great source of strength, a key source of motivation, to keep going when the going is tough, to keep going when you're getting nothing out.

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**Luke 17:1-10**

Jesus is speaking to his disciples, the apostles, his key ministry men. And he drops quite a bombshell on them. He says some things that really shattered some of their expectations of what they were getting themselves into. He lays down something of how they are going to have to live, particularly in dealing with people – and the standard was high, to say the least – way higher than what they had yet realised! It's a way of life that applies to us ministers as well.

There are 3 instructions here of how they must conduct themselves with people.

**First he says, they must be sure they NEVER CAUSE ANYONE TO SIN [v.1-3]**

He says there is so much out there to cause people to sin. Temptation abounds. I think we know this. From the blatant acts of pimps and sex-traffickers getting children involved in drugs and sex, to the subtlety of advertising with its lustful innuendos and naked images. The world and the media are all about causing people to sin! And we know for ourselves what temptation we face in any given day. A critical word as a conversation starts about someone we don't much like or a lustful glance as you walk past a beautiful blonde in the shops. Temptation is everywhere lurking. We don't have to go looking for it; it finds us all the time. We are all too aware that things that cause people to sin are bound to come!

But it's so easy to think of ourselves as just on the receiving end of temptation, we seldom think of ourselves as being on the opposite end, the giving end of temptation. That we might cause others to sin. But yet that's reality, we can and may lead others into temptation. No doubt we've made others angry [if you deny it, I'm sure we can just ask your spouse and they will confirm it!] Or we've made others jealous, even made others lust. Or perhaps because of our bad driving made others swear! At times it may not even be deliberate, but our word and actions can cause others to stumble.

But of course you appreciate why Jesus issues this warning to his disciples, '... but woe to that person through whom [sin] comes.' Because as leaders, and particularly as ministers, we are in position of great influence over people's lives. Our main responsibility is to shepherd the flock so that they grow spiritually. Their spiritual lives are partly in our hands. Our job is to keep people from sinning! Make them, help them sin less! When you think about it, that's actually something of our job

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description! In a way that's what our task comes down to! God has entrusted us with the spiritual well-being of his 'little ones' of his children, of his sheep – what a responsibility. So that's why he issues a serious warning, a very serious warning to his disciples and to us. That's its better for us to be drowned than for us to cause one of his people to sin. Now I don't know how hearing this makes you feel – but it makes me want to run! Now, of course, he's using metaphor, he's not being dogmatic; he knows we not perfect, he knows we make mistakes. So he's not saying God is going to string us up every time we in avertedly cause someone to sin. But he's certainly saying, first and foremost we must be sure we never deliberately in our teaching and life keep anyone out of the kingdom. If we teach heretically, if live so hypocritically that it discredits the gospel and turns others away, we are in great danger yes. If we use the gospel just to our own ends and leave behind us a wake of broken people – then we've got a thing coming. But what he's really doing is raising the bar and setting the standard. Jesus is wanting his disciples, and us, to see how important our teaching and living is – that it's a serious calling. Making his disciples and us very aware that this is not a casual business we in. It comes with a huge responsibility. Realise that!

As we know James says [3:1] ... teachers will be judged more strictly. This because of the great influence they have; particularly through what they say. And as James then reminds us, the tongue is the hardest part of the body to control. So we must indeed be careful.

And so Jesus says to his disciples, 'Watch yourselves.' And that's what we need to do. We need to always be asking ourselves "How is my teaching and how is my living, influencing the people?" "Do I teach what is right and live what is true." Am I careful to explain and apply God's word, determined to teach the Bible nothing more, nothing less. How are my actions and words affecting others. Am I showing self-control, am I being patient, is my conversation always seasoned with salt, am I an example that others can follow?

Paul says in 1 Tim 4:16 "*Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers.*"

What we teach and how we live it of utmost importance for us ministers. God, forbid that our teaching and our lives are leading others astray! Indeed a tall order. Disciples probably thinking 'Well that's a bit more than I originally bargained for!' But there's more! The other two instructions Jesus gives here are much shorter.

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**Second he says they must REBUKE those who sin**

Now the shoe is on the other foot. Not only must we not cause anyone to sin, but those who are sinning we must admonish, and turn them from it. Here's where we've got to confront and disciple. We all know how hard it is to do this at times. To actually say to someone, look this area of your life, what you are doing here, is wrong. To know how to approach the issue, to start the conversation; the courage, boldness that's sometimes needed. It's most often not easy to admonish. It's one thing point out all the refs mistakes when you're watching rugby, it's another thing all together to rebuke an erring member! And of course what makes it even more difficult, is not just having to tell people they're wrong, but doing it correctly, doing it the right way

Remember as Paul says in Gal 6:1, 'Brothers, if someone is caught in sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. It's to rebuke a brother gently that's also not easy. And especially if we're the ones offended perhaps, the ones sinned against. Then it's easy for our pride and egos and rights, to get in the way, and we overreact, we can be harsh; we are judgmental.

But the charge is there, rebuke. And so, connected to his first instruction, Jesus is making clear that far from leading people into sin, we must lead them away from sin, we must help restore them spiritually. Again, not easy though.

**Then the last command he gives his disciples here is to FORGIVE.**

If people have sinned against us we need to have a forgiving spirit. If people criticize us unjustly, don't keep their commitments to us, we must forgive them. And we must forgive them more than once if necessary! Do it repeatedly, even 7 times in a day. Remember Jesus' answer to Peter when he ask how many times he should forgive his brother who sins against him ... up to 7 times, Peter suggesting, thinking that would be ample. To which Jesus replied, 'I tell you, not 7 times, but 70x7 times!' [Matt 18:21-22. We must always be seeking reconciliation, restoring relationships. We must show great patience, forbearance, understanding and compassion. What a challenge to be forgiving like this. Again a tall order

*And so by now, how are the disciple feeling?*

Uneasy. How are we going to do this? This is too much for us! Sounds impossible. WE ARE INADEQUATE! **And so we come to their response in v.5, "INCREASE**

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**OUR FAITH!"** "Increase our faith! – The disciples are saying Lord help us, we can't do this on our own. We fail, we fall short! We're inadequate!! Increase our faith i.e. increase our ability to do these things! And so you see what's happened, Jesus has got them right where he wants them; right where they need to be. Everything Jesus has said so far has been to bring them to this point, to make them feel their inadequacy and realize their great need for the Lord's help in doing their work. **Jesus' answer to them in v.6, confirms this 'IF YOU HAVE FAITH AS SMALL AS A MUSTARD SEED'.**

Here is a verse that's often totally misunderstood and taken out of context; given meaning it was never intended to have. Jesus is here telling them the answer to what the need to do to fulfill the great responsibility and task he has called them to do. He's comforting them and assuring them, and the answer is him ... 'if you have faith as small as a mustard seed'. Notice what Jesus is saying here. He is not saying its about how much faith you have, but rather what your faith is in. If you have faith as small as a mustard seed. Clearly not the amount of faith. We know the mustard seed itself is a tiny little seed. His point is what your faith is in, the object of your faith. **SO HE IS SAYING IF YOUR FAITH IS IN ME, YOU CAN DO THE SEEMINGLY IMPOSSIBLE.** "I make all the difference," Jesus is saying, I give the strength, the power, the ability. It's as you rest in me. He is saying trust in me, depend upon me, if you're looking to me for strength you'll be able to do these things, to fulfill this seeming impossible calling.

Jesus is saying I will enable you to watch your life, I will help you to rebuke your brother, I will help you to forgive your brother. So as Jesus has been teaching his disciples here, he is teaching them one very important lesson, perhaps the most important lesson for doing ministry – we cannot do a thing without him. He must work through us. So he has purposely been exposing their weakness, their inadequacy, to bring them to realise their complete dependence upon God. It's not about them and what they can and can't do, it's about Christ and what he can do through them. He has humbled them. That's his point so far, and now they ready to hear the main lesson, he wants to get across to them. Now they ready to hear what they are really getting themselves into! What being a servant of God actually involves.

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Jesus goes onto tell them a short parable about of servant who is expected to still work and wait on his master after he has already finished his day's work in the field. This parable comes as a little of a shock. Makes us a little uneasy. But it makes such a sobering point. He has spent the whole day plowing the fields, looking after the sheep, and now his master expects him still do make supper, serve him his food, and only after that eat himself. And after all this the master won't even thank the servant!

Isn't that a bit much, isn't that a bit harsh. Well no, as Jesus makes clear. The man is a servant after all, so should he really be expecting to sit with his master at the dining room table and enjoy a meal together, while perhaps someone else serves them both? Of course not!

As a servant he must be ready to serve the master day and night. He is only doing his duty. The nature of a servant is to serve, is to give, is to be ready and prepared to do whatever the master tells you. A servant recognizes his job is well ... to serve! So as Jesus ends in **v.10** '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.'

How humbling, how challenging. Jesus has painted very clearly for us, how radical servanthood is. If the disciples thought the watching and the rebuking and the forgiving was tough, try this! But they had been humbled, they had been made aware their inadequacy and their need to trust the Lord for strength. So they were ready to hear to hear this final radical call of duty. He is saying that their calling, and our calling is to serve, and serve, and serve. **That my friend is what we need. We need to really get what servanthood is actually about.** We know we called to be servants, we know that Christian leadership is servant leadership. We know that it is as Jesus said to his disciples elsewhere, our leadership is not like the rulers of Gentiles who lord it over them, but like that of a servant. We know that Christian leadership is not like worldly leadership in this way.

In fact it's quite the opposite, the world is about self-assertiveness, for us it is about self-lessness. But do we really accept, do we really get what that means on ground level? It means that we are here for them. It means that a true servant heart is interested in benefiting others ... that's the end, that's where it stops i.e. And not in getting anything back for ourselves. So often when we serve we put others in debt to us. We do it, but at the back of our minds we're thinking "You owe me!"

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We expect sometimes to sit down at the dinner table and be served. We think that after plowing the fields we've done enough. We tend to place conditions on our servanthood ... if this and that ... but this and that... Yet Jesus says in plowing the fields, looking after the sheep, and serving the dinner, we are only unworthy servants ... all of that is just our duty [we haven't even gone above the call of duty. Jesus has given a high view of ministry, especially with highlighting the true nature of a servant. But now this talk is not meant to weigh us down, but encourage.

So how does all this fit into persevering in the ministry? And here it is. The point is this, that if we really understand servanthood, we, I believe, we will be able to keep going no matter what. That truly being a servant is key to persevering in the ministry.

Here are 3 ways as we close:

**If we truly have a servant heart we will be happy to do our duty, taking on the great responsibility, accepting the cost.**

Yes it's hard to labour over the Scriptures to ensure we present the truth, and only what God is saying. Yes it's hard to always be living a life that's an example, striving for holiness, not doing certain things, going certain places for the sake of living above reproach at all times. Yes it's hard always having people's eyes on us watching what we're doing. "Can't I just be free of the responsibility of teaching diligently and living righteously?" Then, you realise you're a servant, this is only your duty, you are happy to carry on doing it.

**Or,** "If I rebuke that man, he will probably leave the church and never speak to me again. Also I know he's a big giver, what if we lose his support?" It's hard, you could lose quite a bit. Then, you realise you're a servant, this is only your duty, you are happy to carry on doing it.

**Or,** "They hurt me! I've poured my life into that couple, worked through marriage problems, helped them financially, given them so much time, it seemed they appreciated it, that we formed a close relationship. But now they hardly coming to church and are preferring to follow advice of other non-Christian friends of theirs. How can I forgive them?" Then, you realise you're a servant, this is only your duty, you are happy to carry on doing it.

**E.g.** Being last in the queue. Paul in Corinthians. 1 Cor 4:9 'For it seems to me that God has put us apostles on display at the end of the procession, like men condemned to

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die in the arena... ' He's saying that in fact is the position of Gods' servants, at the end of the procession, at the back of the queue. When you understand that you're a servant, you happy to be last in line.

**If we truly have a servant heart our expectations will be better/results will matter less**

"I'm faithfully teaching the word of God, but the people don't appreciate it, they don't come to church regularly to hear the word, they aren't growing in their commitment to God. The church hasn't grown, people haven't changed. Some don't like me even, are even resisting my ministry."

Then you remember you are a servant, and it matters not, you are happy to give and give and not receive

**E.g.** an example of a minster who persevered without results is Charles Simeon

Anglican Pastor in late 1700's, early 1800's in Cambridge, England. He pastored the same church for 54 years. Yes it's remarkable that he was at one church for so long. But the real marvel is that he even lasted a year. The opposition he faced, especially in first 12 years was incredible. To start with, the congregation didn't want him, they wanted another man; but the bishop appointed Simeon. The first thing they did was refuse him to take the afternoon service, and gave it to the other man, Mr Hammond. When he retired after 5 years, they still didn't allow Simeon to take the service, and for still another 7 years had someone else take it. They really had it in for him. In fact during this time Simeon tried to start a later evening service, but the churchwardens locked the door, leaving the people standing outside. Simeon even on one occasion got a locksmith to come open the door. Such was the opposition he faced. Further some members locked their pews, forcing him to preach to a standing congregation. He then at his own expense set up chairs in the aisles and corners of the sanctuary. But again the church wardens took the chairs and threw them out into the church yard! Not to mention having doors closed as he tried to do house visitation, people spreading rumours about him, stones thrown through the church windows...But through all this he persisted and gradually overcame their resistance.

How was he able to do this? ...This tells me he wasn't in it for the money, he wasn't in it for the fame. He wasn't in it to be first. He was quite happy to be last, because it wasn't the results that were most important, but serving God.

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**If we truly have a servant heart we will be ministering in the Lord's power and not ours.**

It's in those times when we've got nothing to go on but God, that we really have Gods' strength working through us. When we have a servant heart we cope better with suffering because we're so much more aware that when we are weak he is strong. So as a servant, when we have nothing go on we remember our Lord and what he went through much more vividly. How he had nothing to go on, how all had deserted him, even his closet disciples, how with only the prospect of taking God's wrath for our sin, in that darkest hour he still said not my will but yours be done. We take courage from Christ's example so much more when we've got nothing to go on. We remember that he, the son of man, did not come to be served, but to serve and give his life a ransom for many.

And with this we then remember too that his suffering though was the path to glory – he overcame, he conquered, he rose from the dead he ascended into heaven. And so it was for that joy set before him that he endured the cross. Now because of him we too have that same hope – that he will bring us through, that even in the end we will be with him, that one day we will hear him say to us 'Well done good and faithful servant' As we look to Christ, we are reminded indeed, that the last shall be first, and that it will be for us!

And there it is that's the faith the disciples needed, that's the faith we need, looking to Christ, trusting in him for the strength we need.

E.g. I'm not sure if you can relate to this, but when I read of this analogy it struck me. I don't know if you ever found yourself as a kid having to climb though a hedge or thick bush. Happened to me a few times when the ball got kicked next door and had to go and fetch it remember my initial apprehension to go through hedge – the thought of going in head first jabbed and cut by braches and thorns. But you went it slowly carefully, squeezing your way through, taking a poke and as scratch here and there. But then, what I found was once your head and shoulders, and arms were through other side, you felt nothing to quickly pull your body and legs through. Well as someone had described, its the same with us and Christ in our struggles. He says '...we must not mind a little suffering for Christ's sake. When I am getting through a hedge, if my shoulders are safely through, I can bear the pricking of my legs. Let us

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rejoice in the remembrance that our holy Head has surmounted all suffering and triumphed over death. Let us follow him patiently; we shall soon be partakers of his victory.”

As a true servant, you are always conscious of the example of Christ and are strengthened to carry on.

**Conclusion**

So understanding servanthood makes a big difference in persevering.

We're happy to do our duty, we're happy when results are few, we're happy because we know Jesus has gone before us.

If we can recapture what it is to serve, what it really means, being happy to be last – it will go a long way in helping us persevere in the ministry.

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