

October 5-6, 2013

Readings: Habakkuk. 1:2-3; 2:2-4; 2 Tim. 1:6-14; Luke 17:5-10

If someone referred to you as “useless,” I imagine you would be very offended. If you referred to yourself as “useless,” that may well signal some low self-esteem issues. Older versions of today’s Gospel used the word *useless* with respect to the servant, while the more recent translation renders the Greek adjective as *unprofitable*. But the sense of the word seems to be ill-suited here, because the servant has done all that he was required to do. The only other time this word is used is in the Parable of the Talents (Matthew 25), in which that servant squanders the talents, burying them in the ground instead. He is called a *useless* servant, and thrust into the darkness.

We read so much about unconditional love in the Scriptures that it seems totally out of place to see that Jesus is asking us to refer to ourselves as “useless” or even “unprofitable,” if one prefers the newer rendering. Scholars have debated this passage for centuries, and there is no agreement to this day. Parables are not always crystal clear, and perhaps this is the point.

Pope Pius XII wrote an encyclical on Scripture in 1943 in which he attempted to address some of the challenges of his day in interpreting the sense of Sacred Scripture. Specifically, he spoke to the difficulty of understanding the meaning of some passages:

God wished difficulties to be scattered through the Sacred Books inspired by Him, in order that we might be urged to read and scrutinize them more intently, and, experiencing in a salutary manner our own limitations, we might be exercised in due submission of mind.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Pope Pius XII *Divinu afflante spiritu*, #45 ( cf. St. Augustine, *Epist. 149 ad Paulinum*, n. 34 (PL 33, col. 644); *De diversis quaestionibus*, q. 53, n. 2; *Enarr. in Ps. 146*, n. 12

God may not always want it to be easy to understand Scripture—at times, perhaps He wants us to wrestle with its meaning. So too with today’s passage; we must ask ourselves some questions. What does it mean to be an unprofitable servant, even if we set aside the sense of uselessness? What are our most basic duties?

A number of years ago I was conducting business in a drive-through bank. I cashed my check, received the little sealed white envelope, and proceed to drive home without first checking the envelope. Only after I got home did I realize upon opening, that the envelope contained \$50. I was virtually certain that the check was only for \$25, so I drove back to the bank. When I explained my situation, the voice on the speaker paused...I waited... “Is there a problem, I asked?” “No, I have found the check...you are correct, sir... (pause) but why did you come back?”

We are unprofitable servants. We are doing our duty. The news reported a story about a homeless Boston man who found a backpack containing \$2,400 in cash and traveler’s checks worth nearly \$40,000. He was honored by the Police Department and said that as a man of faith, it never even crossed his mind to keep the money. He did the right thing, the virtuous thing. But as a Christian, did he do anything **extraordinary**? He did his duty, did he not? If it seems extraordinary, it is because we live in a remarkably selfish age.

Doing one’s duty is not a negative, but rather is a response to our God-given calling. By our Baptism and Confirmation we are taking upon ourselves the responsibility of what it means to be a Christian. We follow the example of Jesus Christ, and in doing our simple duty, we do not profit ourselves in the sense that we have earned heaven. How can we pay back to God in full the graces that he has bestowed upon us?

This parable is challenging precisely because it places each of us back at square one. If we really desire to be followers of Jesus Christ, let us check our motives, and make no claim for having done more than what was due. In carrying out our sacred duty, God will mercifully reward us, as he has promised. If we dare to call God our Father, let us be prepared then to act as His sons and daughters, and see this as the sacred deposit he has entrusted to us.

Like the apostle Paul, we should not be ashamed of testifying to our Lord, guarding the truth that has been entrusted to us by the Holy Spirit who dwells within us. We are still precious in God's eyes, but each of us has both a sacred duty to fulfill and a privilege in being called Christians. This name requires of us nothing short of a complete commitment. Yet, we rejoice in the saving knowledge that God's grace will continue to support and sustain us. We are grateful to be called His servants.