

## Luke 12:35-57

### The Responsibility of a Slave

Slavery is a concept which few people in this country have had to experience or even witness, yet it still does exist in some parts of the world. We know that slavery formerly existed in this country, but the connection anyone has with that institution is through history books, many of which have been written with a considerable bias so as to make the period seem more humane than it was or worse than it was. Our perceptions of slavery are imaginary and probably not very accurate.

But to the people in Jesus' audience, slavery was a part of the culture. It was not an issue for debate as it was in this country before the Civil War. Slavery simply was. It existed. The government supported it. Ordinary people had nothing to say about it.

In Jesus' day, being a slave was definitely an undesirable position. While many slaves had reasonable masters, many did not. A slave was a piece of property and could be treated in any fashion. The more businesslike masters treated their slaves humanely in order to protect their investment. But an owner could beat or even kill a slave with impunity, although torture was forbidden.

I mention all of this because Jesus, and later the writers of the New Testament, used the image of slavery often to represent the relationship between believers and God. It's a master-slave relationship. While the King James Version uses the word servant, the position described is that of a slave, one with no rights, no rewards, and no vacations. In this lesson, we will be considering a series of slave metaphors given by Jesus and recorded in Luke 12:35-57.

Jesus' message is the Responsibility of a Slave.

From our experience, responsibility is often neglected. We can understand our responsibility to our loved ones, either to respect and obey our elders or to direct and care for those in our charge. Those are easy responsibilities to understand, but we see people drop the ball constantly.

Responsibility on the job is easy to understand. Employees have promised to work for the good of the company in exchange for a stated pay. Yet, employees often forget that responsibility and feel justified in being late or absent, or not working very hard.

But what is the responsibility of a slave? There is no bond of love like for family. There is no bond of money like with a job. Why would a slave want to try to be responsible? I think that is why Jesus chose this image to illustrate our relationship to God. It is unexpected. It is not clouded with the emotional or financial baggage of other relationships. We are God's slaves, slaves by right of conquest. We have no rights, no property, not even days off. We cannot vote or participate in the making of laws. We simply have a job to do for the Master. We do it for no other reason than it's the right thing to do. Also, the other choices are not very attractive: to submit out of fear of punishment or to rebel and be punished. But even a slave could have dignity by being responsible.

Jesus begins with a departure from the customs of slavery in His society by describing a very unusual master, one who gives gifts for being responsible.

Luke 12:35-38

35 "Be dressed in readiness, and {keep} your lamps alight.

36 "And be like men who are waiting for their master when he returns from the wedding feast, so that they may immediately open {the door} to him when he comes and knocks.

37 "Blessed are those slaves whom the master shall find on the alert when he comes; truly I say to you, that he will gird himself {to serve,} and have them recline {at the table,} and will come up and wait on them.

38 "Whether he comes in the second watch, or even in the third, and finds {them} so, blessed are those {slaves}

A twitter of laughter surely rippled through the crowd when Jesus said, "And the master will gird himself to serve and wait on them." In Jesus' time, in the experience of the audience, that just wasn't going to happen. In fact, over in Luke 17:7-8, Jesus makes the opposite point that a normal master would actually put those alert slaves to work serving him immediately. It didn't matter that they were tired or sleepy. Slaves worked.

It would be obvious to the crowd that the master here was God, and that, although we are slaves of God, He is a very unusual master. But we are slaves nonetheless, having no rights, no pay, although an undeserved, unearned gift just might be forthcoming because of the strange nature of the Master, not the goodness of the slave. These slaves performed well, but, normally, this alertness would only avert a beating, not elicit reward.

And therein lies the rub. How do we adopt the attitude of a slave and not keep one eye open for the undeserved, unearned, and now anticipated gift? Jesus will expand on that sense of responsibility what should keep us away from expecting a return on investment.

Notice that these slaves remained alert for a long time. In fact, due to the unpredictable length of a Middle Eastern wedding, the master could have returned at any hour over a period of a week. The waiting must have been boring. A lot of effort surely went to waste before the master returned in dried out meals, cleaned rooms, and trimmed wicks. But it was the right thing to do, as Jesus continues to illustrate.

The need for responsibility cannot be anticipated.

Luke 12:39-40

39 "And be sure of this, that if the head of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have allowed his house to be broken into.

40 "You too, be ready; for the Son of Man is coming at an hour that you do not expect."

This "thief in the night" image is used at least twice by Jesus, and also by Paul, Peter, and John, all for the same purpose. Jesus will return at an unexpected moment.

So why did Jesus mention this? Certainly not to announce His second coming, since the first was not yet fully revealed. His point was, "Responsibility cannot be anticipated."

What do most students do if given an assignment two weeks in advance? They do it the night before it is due. What would most people do if the dates of their deaths or the end of the world were known? They would wait until the night before to repent.

But what would be the quality of the assignment done the night before? Surely less than a best effort. Legalists like to argue that, if one person can turn to God just before the end, then it's OK for everyone to take that risk and live for themselves and repent later. First, that is quite a risk. Second, I doubt God will be fooled. There is a fundamental difference between someone who came to understand the gospel late in life, and someone who knowingly put off the gospel, trying to have selfishness and heaven.

Jesus says that responsibility cannot be anticipated. It has to always be there.  
Third, Jesus says that responsibility begets responsibility.

Luke 12:41-44

41 And Peter said, "Lord, are You addressing this parable to us, or to everyone {else} as well?"

42 And the Lord said, "Who then is the faithful and sensible steward, whom his master will put in charge of his servants, to give them their rations at the proper time?"

43 "Blessed is that slave whom his master finds so doing when he comes.

44 "Truly I say to you, that he will put him in charge of all his possessions.

Notice that Jesus never directly answered Peter's question. So it would be irresponsible of us to try to supply one. He just went on expanding on the meaning of responsibility.

Responsibility implies risk. If you have a responsibility, you can fail to execute it properly. Having responsibility means discharging your duties even when something else, anything else, looks like more fun at the time. There are times we wish we had no responsibilities. There are times when the weight of our responsibilities tempts us to run screaming into the night.

And what was the slave's reward for acting responsibly? He was given more responsibility. I expect that the slave was thinking, "Couldn't I just have Saturday's off instead?"

Being placed in a more responsible position may look desirable from a distance. We often fell jealous if someone else is picked for more responsibility. Our initial reaction to getting a job with more responsibility is happiness, satisfaction, until we have to start doing it.

Jesus is painting a realistic picture of the responsibilities of the kingdom. It's the right thing to do. We have to be responsible all the time. And, as our dubious reward, we get more responsibility. Let's not be surprised when more of the business of the kingdom gets pushed off on us as time goes on. If it's not happening that way, we must not be very responsible in God's eyes.

Fourth, responsibility comes from the heart.

Luke 12:45-46

45 "But if that slave says in his heart, 'My master will be a long time in coming,' and begins to beat the slaves, {both} men and women, and to eat and drink and get drunk;

46 the master of that slave will come on a day when he does not expect {him,} and at an hour he does not know, and will cut him in pieces, and assign him a place with the unbelievers.

Why would someone put off responsibility? Silly question. We need only look at our own lives to find lots of examples. Jesus' example was of someone who was just sure that this breach of responsibility would never be noticed, that there would be time to recover. The heart that would believe that would believe anything. Somehow this slave overlooked how hard it might be to shift from drunk back to responsible.

This may seem like pretty harsh treatment for one little indiscretion, but I think the reason was because the thought process was from the heart. It wasn't a momentary lapse or an accident due to poor but well intended judgment. The slave reasoned that he could get away with it.

But why the harsh reaction? The master back in verse 37 was so overjoyed at finding responsibility that he broke with all social custom and served his slaves. Here, the master gets what he probably expected, and goes to the opposite extreme.

Responsibility comes from the heart. It is the result of faith, trusting that the Master meant what He said. It's a matter of love, doing the Master's bidding even when we don't think anyone will know, because He's the Master. Lapses in responsibility signal a deeper problem.

Fifth, ability begets responsibility.

Luke 12:47-48

47 "And that slave who knew his master's will and did not get ready or act in accord with his will, shall receive many lashes,

48 but the one who did not know {it,} and committed deeds worthy of a flogging, will receive but few. And from everyone who has been given much shall much be required; and to whom they entrusted much, of him they will ask all the more.

Ability begets responsibility. To whom much is given, much is expected.

That should seem especially significant to every American. The August Reader's Digest has an article describing the many places around the world where Christians might be imprisoned, sold into slavery, or murdered just because they are professed followers of Jesus. Some of those governments are run by fundamentalist Moslems, some by atheistic communists. In contrast, we have petty national debates over separation of church and state, school prayer, and creation versus evolution. To pull a weak, stretched-to-the-brink-of-credibility illustration of persecution from the modern American experience is pointless. We are the wealthy, those with every opportunity. I wish those who complain about our country could live for a year or two in a re-education labor camp in China, or be sold briefly into slavery in central Africa.

We are certainly in the class described in verse 47. We know the Master's will. We have every advantage to help us do it. Therefore, God's expectations of us must be very high. Such is the nature of responsibility.

Since we find it next to impossible to relate to the horrible conditions in which most of the Christians of the world live, let us compare the ability we display on our jobs against the ability we display in the work of the kingdom. We are responsible to use our ability.

Sixth, difficulty requires responsibility.

Luke 12:49-53

49 "I have come to cast fire upon the earth; and how I wish it were already kindled!

50 "But I have a baptism to undergo, and how distressed I am until it is accomplished!

51 "Do you suppose that I came to grant peace on earth? I tell you, no, but rather division;

52 for from now on five {members} in one household will be divided, three against two, and two against three.

53 "They will be divided, father against son, and son against father; mother against daughter, and daughter against mother; mother-in-law against daughter-in-law, and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law."

What is the first thought we have when things go badly? "What did I do wrong?" And that is a good place to start. Too many people ask instead, "Why is this happening to me?" or "Who made this happen to me?"

But even when we don't try to blame others for our misfortunes, we often harbor this feeling that, if God were pleased with me, this wouldn't be happening. Many people have the

completely false idea that, if they're good, that God will see to it that nothing bad happens. And, if something bad does happen, it means God is mad at them.

"Nope," Jesus says. "Do you suppose I came to bring peace on earth? I tell you no, but rather division."

Unless we have this responsibility toward Godly things, difficulty will destroy us. Surviving difficulty requires responsibility.

When the practice of our faith is characterized by a teetering responsibility, when we fail to pray and study and meet together diligently - with no exceptions - during good times, where will we find the strength to survive the bad times?

Most of the people I have known who would not miss a church meeting for anything, did not do it because they thought they had to be there, but because, if a measly three feet of snow could stop them, what would happen if they got in real trouble?

And finally, common sense begets responsibility.

Luke 12:54-57

54 And He was also saying to the multitudes, "When you see a cloud rising in the west, immediately you say, 'A shower is coming,' and so it turns out.

55 "And when {you see} a south wind blowing, you say, 'It will be a hot day,' and it turns out {that way.}

56 "You hypocrites! You know how to analyze the appearance of the earth and the sky, but why do you not analyze this present time?

57 "And why do you not even on your own initiative judge what is right?

Initiative is required of those in the kingdom. Jesus' reference in verse 57 is to the rabbis of His time. The common person tended to believe the local clergyman about things religious. They didn't put too much thought into how the rabbi came up with his conclusion. Yet, the crowds could quickly start a riot, defending this or that rabbi's opinion.

Jesus pointed out that ordinary people have common sense which they use every day. God's word can be understood by anyone with enough sense to observe the weather. Not only are we all able, we are responsible for having that level of initiative. Following someone else's opinion about God without checking them out ourselves is about on par with thinking, "My Master will be a long time coming." It's not just irresponsible; it's not very smart. Staking eternal life on some else's opinion is an unreasonable risk. Common sense says we need to investigate for ourselves. Surely, the opinions of others are useful for pointing out where we have built creative excuses, but I will be judged by my understanding, not that of someone else.

A very large burden would be lifted from us all if we could just claim that we were not able to discern such deep and spiritual things. Unfortunately, Jesus has removed that excuse. Every accountable person has been granted sufficient ability, common sense, so that we have the responsibility to know the Word of God for ourselves.

We are the slaves of a peculiar Master, a Master who demands responsibility, a Master who reacts to an extreme when we lack responsibility, but a Master who is overjoyed when He finds it.

Responsibility is a quality we need to work on day in and day out in order to be prepared, or our resolve will fail when it matters most.

Responsibility is a requirement, not a recommendation. When we know what is right, there can be no excuse for not getting it done, no reason to break a promise, not excuses like being tired or busy. Slaves do not have those options.

Practice with a little responsibility makes us able to handle the important stuff. Can you imagine heaven left in the care of the American church? They would turn the river of life into a toxic waste dump and wonder why it smelled bad.

We are the luckiest people of all of history, living in peace, prosperity, and freedom. People in other parts of the world have to deal with hunger, violence, imprisonment, even death as they discharge their responsibilities. The only temptation we have is selfishness.

Responsibility is required of the people of God.