

Luke 17:7

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

But which of you, having a servant plowing or feeding cattle, will say unto him by and by, when he is come from the field, Go and sit down to meat?

Analysis

But which of you, having a servant plowing or feeding cattle, will say unto him by and by, when he is come from the field, Go and sit down to meat?

Jesus begins a parable challenging assumptions about merit and reward. The phrase **which of you** (τίς ἐξ ὑμῶν, *tis ex hymōn*) invites hearers to imagine themselves as masters. A **servant** (δοῦλον, *doulon*—literally "slave") returns from field work—**plowing or feeding cattle** (ἀροτριῶντα ἢ ποιμαίνοντα, *arotriounta ē poimainonta*)—exhausting agricultural labor. The master's expected response is rhetorical: no master would immediately say **Go and sit down to meat** (παρελθὼν εὐθέως ἀνάπεσε, *parelthōn eutheōs anapese*—"come right away and recline at table").

The phrase **by and by** translates εὐθέως (*eutheōs*, "immediately")—the master won't immediately release the servant to eat. First-century cultural expectations were clear: servants served masters before attending to their own needs. The question establishes common ground before Jesus applies the principle spiritually (vv. 9-10): believers are servants who've done only what was commanded, owing God everything, earning nothing. This confronts self-congratulatory religion that expects divine reward for obedience, as if God were indebted to those who serve Him.

Historical Context

First-century Palestinian agriculture depended on slave and servant labor. Plowing and shepherding were arduous tasks performed from dawn to dusk. Social hierarchies were rigid—servants existed to serve masters' needs, not vice versa. The cultural expectation that servants would prepare and serve the master's meal before eating themselves was universally understood. Jesus uses this accepted social reality to illustrate spiritual truth about humanity's relationship to God. The parable addressed the disciples (v. 5) but also the Pharisees' merit-based theology—they believed rigorous law-keeping earned divine reward, making God their debtor. Jesus demolishes this presumption: we're servants who owe God perfect obedience; we can never put Him in our debt.

Related Passages

Revelation 20:12 — Judgment according to deeds

Romans 2:1 — Judging others

Study Questions

1. How does viewing yourself as God's servant (not employee or contractor) change your expectations about spiritual rewards?
2. In what ways does contemporary Christianity sometimes operate with a merit-based mindset that expects God to 'pay back' our service?
3. What does it mean practically to serve God without expecting immediate recognition or reward?

Interlinear Text

Τίς	δὲ	ἐκ	ὕμῶν	δοῦλον	ἔχων	ἀροτριῶντα	ἢ
which	But	from	you	a servant	having	plowing	or
G5101	G1161	G1537	G5216	G1401	G2192	G722	G2228
ποιμαίνοντα	ὃς	εἰσελθόντι	ἐκ	τοῦ	ἀγροῦ	ἐρεῖ	
feeding cattle	unto him	when he is come	from	G3588	the field	will say	
G4165	G3739	G1525	G1537		G68	G2046	
Εὐθέως	παρελθὼν	ἀνάπεσαι·					
by and by	Go	and sit down to meat					
G2112	G3928	G377					

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