

The Second Sunday in Angels' Tide, October 2, 2022

Pastor Peter Gregory, Our Savior Lutheran Church, Westminister, Massachusetts

Our Duty, God's Mercy

Luke 17:1–10

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Eph 1:2

Jesus said: **“Will any one of you who has a servant plowing or keeping sheep say to him when he has come in from the field, ‘Come at once and recline at table’? Will he not rather say to him, ‘Prepare supper for me, and dress properly, and serve me while I eat and drink, and afterward you will eat and drink’? Does he thank the servant because he did what was commanded? So you also, when you have done all that you were commanded, say, ‘We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty’”** (vv 7–10)

What we believe is summarized in a little document called the Small Catechism. If you're a member of this congregation, you should be very familiar with it. If you're a child or young adult, then either you've memorized much of it or you will in the future. And if you're relatively new to Our Savior, if you want to know more about what we believe or become a deeper part of who we are and what we do or just go through a review, I invite you to study the Small Catechism with us at our next adult instruction class. The first one will be tomorrow evening at 7:00 pm.

Near the end of the Small Catechism is a section called the “Table of Duties.” It follows the Ten Commandments, the Apostles' Creed, and the Lord's Prayer, and teaching on Baptism, Confession, and the Sacrament of the Altar, and a section on daily prayers. The Table of Duties is simply a list of Bible passages for different positions in life. There are verses about the duties of pastors and lay people, husbands and wives, parents and children, workers and employers, youth, widows, and everyone. If you want to know what you ought to do—what your duties in life are—start there.

Jesus has something to say about doing our duty. About doing what we ought to do. He compares our duties with those of a servant. **“When you've done all that you were commanded,”** Jesus says, **“say, ‘We're unworthy servants; we've only done what was our duty’”** (v 10).

Those words might rub you the wrong way. They certainly cut against the grain in our day. We're used to getting credit just for showing up—participation ribbons, good attendance records—as if being where we're supposed to be is some great virtue. We want recognition and praise for doing what's expected—for taking out the trash and folding the laundry, for picking up our toys or turning in our report on time. We'd laugh if it didn't hit so close to home. But what are these things except doing our duty? Doing exactly what we ought to be doing? We shouldn't need applause for just doin' our job! That's what Jesus is talking about.

So,

- When you do good, when you help others—*you've only done your duty.*
- When you resist temptations to sin, to take revenge, to take what's not yours—*you've only done your duty.*
- When you forgive those who sin against you, even seven times a day and more—*you've only done your duty.*
- When you're faithful, kind, and compassionate—*you've only done your duty.*
- Pastor, when you preach God's word faithfully, and, hearers, when you honor and support this preaching—*you've only done your duty.*
- Husbands, when you love your wives as Christ loved the Church, and, wives, when you submit to your husbands as the Church submits to Christ—*you've only done your duty.*
- Parents, when you bring your children up in the training and instruction of the Lord, and, children, when you obey your parents—*you've only done your duty.*
- In short, if you keep all the commandments in spirit as well as letter, loving God with your whole heart, soul, mind, and strength and your neighbor as yourself—*you've only done your duty.*

No ribbons, no trophies, no special recognition. No standing ovation or special recognition. *You've only done your duty.* Just say, "**We are unworthy servants.**"

Unworthy doesn't mean worthless or bad. Nor does it mean that these things are insignificant or unimportant. Far from it. It simply means that what we've done is exactly what we were given to do. It's what we were made for and what we've been redeemed for. Instead of our job description, call it our creation and redemption description. This is what we should be doing all the time—not just Christians by everyone! We were wired to live like this!

But, sadly, it's not how things usually go, is it? We need to read the Table of Duties regularly because sin has short-circuited our wiring. We need the reminder. Sin makes what should simply be our duty, what should be natural, into something that seems

unexpected and extraordinary. Forgiveness and doing good are no longer normal. The tabloids are normal.

That can lead us into a trap. When we've done something good, when we've forgiven the person who sinned against us, when we've been generous with our time or money, when we had an opportunity to sin but didn't, do we think that we deserve something special for that? If not from the world, at least from God. "Look how good I've been, shouldn't I get some special recognition? Some reward? At least catch a break?" We treat virtue and goodness as if they're special, when they really should be the most ordinary things of all! And then we're disappointed when we're not rewarded. We feel like God is gyping us and it's not worth the effort. Like we've done good for no reason at all.

Well, Jesus says, what do you expect? Does the servant returned from plowing or keeping the sheep expect the master to be so thankful that he did his duty that the master gets up and serves the servant?

But wait. That sounds like what Jesus did. Actually, He does even more, for He does it for us who haven't even done our duty—not at all, not very well. Here we are in the presence of our Savior, fresh from a week of failing to do good, of provoking others, of failing to forgive; a week of pride and selfishness and hurtful words; a week in which, even if we didn't hurt others, we certainly haven't helped them as much as we should; a week of failing to do our duty. All that, and our Master, Savior, doesn't berate us or dock us. He serves. Jesus even said, "**The Son of Man came not to be servant but to serve and to give His life as a ransom for many**" (Mk 10:45). It's why He taught and healed. It's why He went to the cross. It's why He rose from the grave. It's why He ascended on high.

And it's why He comes to us now in this Divine Service. Like a servant who washes the guests' feet, He bends down to remove our filth and sin. He washes us clean with His word, and dresses us with His righteousness. He speaks to us with kindness and love, and He sets His food and drink, His body and blood, before us, saying, "Come and eat. I've prepared this for you."

Isn't this what we should marvel at? The fact that we don't shows how wrong our thinking has become. It shows how much we think we deserve what Jesus gives us—deserve it for doing good, or at least for not doing bad, as if God owes us. We act as if God's gifts are something we have a right to, something we deserve. We act as if everything starts with us. But that's upside down. Everything starts with God. Without Him there is no world. Without Him there is no life. Without Him we have nothing.

Repent! The right way of thinking is to recognize that all of it—every breath, every cup of water, every bite of oats, every warm blanket and roll of toilet paper is ours because of God’s love and kindness. It’s all undeserved. This is what we confess in the Creed: *“I believe that God has made me and all creatures; that He has given me my body and soul, eyes, ears, and all my members, my reason and all my senses, and still takes care of them. He also gives me clothing and shoes, food and drink, house and home, wife and children, land, animals, and all I have. He richly and daily provides me with all that I need to support this body and life. He defends me against all danger and guards and protects me from all evil. All this He does only out of fatherly, divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness in me. For all this it is my duty to thank and praise, serve and obey Him.”*

This gets the order right. And it’s better. Mercy is better. If we get what we deserve, we get nothing. If we get what we deserve, we pat ourselves on the back. If we get what we deserve, then God is no Father. He’s simply an employer or a master. But if we receive mercy, we get all we need and more. If we receive mercy, we receive love. If we receive mercy, we have God as our Father, His Son as our Savior, and His Spirit to live in us and guide us and help us.

Mercy is better. Sure, sometimes we don’t see it that way. We think of mercy as a last resort, the hope of the hopeless, the domain of the down and out. But isn’t that what we are? Down and out sinners, deserving death and condemnation, in need of mercy. And we have a merciful God.

And so we come today—we who have received mercy. We confess that we haven’t been as merciful as we should be. We haven’t lived by mercy or with mercy toward others. To do our duty, ultimately, isn’t that to show mercy and love to our neighbor according to our station in life? To do for them what our Father has done for us? And we haven’t. So we plead, “Lord, have mercy.” And He does. He forgives. He speaks. He feeds. And He sends us out with these gifts to serve others. Not to give them what they deserve, but to be merciful. For mercy is better.

God’s mercy is the answer to Habakkuk’s complaint that God is taking too long to right the wrongs of this world. God’s mercy is what sustained St. Paul through imprisonment and even martyrdom. God’s mercy is what sustains us—sustains us to do our duty through life and then enter into the life of the world to come. Your God hung on the cross in mercy for you, and He comes with mercy for you now.

We are unworthy servants. Even if we have done all, we have only done our duty. But God has done something even better: He has done mercy to us, undeserved, rich,

wonderful mercy. Mercy that we receive. Mercy that we live by. Mercy enough to share with others. Mercy now and forever.

The peace that passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

Phil 4:7

Credit for the ideas and some of the wording for this sermon belongs to the Rev. James Douthwaite of St. Athanasius Lutheran Church in Vienna, Virginia, for his sermon "Mercy Is Better" from October 6, 2013. Used with permission.