

Be Careful How You Live

by Alistair Begg

Alistair Begg emphasizes the importance of self-examination, accountability, and the necessity of forgiveness in the Christian life.

Duration: 46:28

Scripture: Luke 17:1-10, Luke 17:20-21, Luke 17:23-24

Topics: "Carefulness"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker focuses on the importance of self-reflection and self-awareness. He emphasizes that it is easier for us to notice the faults in others than to confront our own shortcomings. Jesus warns his disciples to 'watch themselves' and be mindful of their own actions. The speaker also discusses the concept of duty and how Jesus expects every person to fulfill their responsibilities. He references biblical passages, such as Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 9, to highlight the importance of preaching the gospel and fulfilling one's duty.

Transcript

Now I invite you to turn with me to Luke chapter 17 as we continue our studies in Luke's Gospel. We read from the first verse. Jesus said to his disciples, Things that cause people to sin are bound to come, but woe to that person through whom they come! It would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a millstone tied around his neck than for him to cause one of these little ones to sin.

So watch yourselves. If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him. If he sins against you seven times in a day and seven times comes back to you and says, I repent, forgive him.

The apostle said to the Lord, Increase our faith. He replied, If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, Be uprooted and planted in the sea, and it will obey you. Suppose one of you had a servant plowing or looking after the sheep.

Would he say to the servant when he comes in from the field, Come along now, and sit down to eat? Would he not rather say, Prepare my supper, get yourself ready, and wait on me while I eat and drink? After that you may eat and drink? Would he thank the servant because he did what he was told to do? So you also, when you've done everything you were told to do, should say, We are unworthy servants. We have only done our duty. Now, with our Bibles open before us, let's just pause and ask God to speak to us this morning through his Word.

Just ask him from your heart, God, if you're real, make yourself real to me. I'm not sure that I have ever met you. If you're following Christ, then ask him, say, Lord Jesus, I want to understand your Word today, and I want to obey it.

Father, without the help of the Spirit, we are absolutely bereft of any contrivance at all that will enable us to make sense of the next few moments. So enable speech and hearing, understanding, obeying, application, so that we might look back on the morning and say, Well, I never expected that, but God met with me there in the worship, as in the preaching of the Word, your mighty acts were declared. Hear our prayers for Jesus' sake.

Amen. At the beginning of chapter 12, as Jesus began to speak to his disciples in front of a great crowd of people that had become as large as thousands--enough for them to be trampling on one another--he had issued a warning for them to be on their guard against what he referred to as the yeast of the Pharisees. This, he said, was actually hypocrisy.

By the time you get to the twentieth chapter, he is pointing out again that these Pharisees liked to wear big, long robes, which drew attention to them. They liked to pray profoundly long prayers in public, and they liked to ensure that they had the seats of honor at all of the special banquets. And so, again, Jesus is urging his followers to make sure that they beware of that kind of thing--that they watch out lest they become infected by that kind of yeast.

Now, as important and as necessary as that warning clearly was, it carried with it an inherent danger. Indeed, it does. Namely, that the followers of the Lord Jesus Christ may become so preoccupied with identifying the discrepancies which they find in the lives of others that they fail to face up to the peculiar challenges which they themselves are facing.

In short and in immediate terms, any one of us can find that it is much easier to detect the things that are wrong in other people than for us to spend two minutes facing up to what is wrong in our own lives. And so, here in the seventeenth chapter, Jesus, using the very same terminology, issues a word of warning, this time to his disciples. You'll see it there as the opening phrase in verse 3. Indeed, this little phrase forms a fulcrum, as it were, on which balances the first two verses and then the fourth verse.

Watch yourselves! Prosekete! Hutois, it is in the Greek. Just one verb, and then yourselves. Watch yourselves! Now, this is not unfamiliar territory, because our parents always told us, Just watch yourself! Don't worry about your sisters, don't worry about your brother, just pay attention to yourself.

The teachers would tell us, Quit turning around, Alistair! Just watch yourself! Or did they only say it to me? Just watch yourself! So what is true in terms of the care that is parental and the care that is that of our scholarly teachers is also true in terms of the exhortation of Jesus regarding spiritual things. And this is not isolated to the Gospels. Those of you who are familiar with the Bible at all will remember that Paul, when he takes his leave of the Ephesian elders in a dramatic scene on the beach, uses the very same terminology, and he says to them, I'm about to leave you, and I want you to watch yourselves, because after my departure there will arise from among you these people who will draw folks after themselves.

So he says it is imperative that you pay attention to yourselves, lest you be found amongst the company of the faithless. In practical terms, it's the kind of exhortation we respond to all the time. The stewardess, the steward, says to us on the airliner, Check to see that your seatbelt is fastened securely.

You can be the kind of person that's always interfering in everyone else's business. Well, have you got yours? Have you got yours? Have you got yours? The thing takes place, and you're bouncing all around like a crazy person, because so concerned were you to make sure that everybody else was in order that you neglected your own circumstances. Put on your own oxygen mask before trying to help anybody else, just in case in your endeavors to fiddle around with everybody else you actually suffocate in 12F.

Be humble enough to recognize that when we really face the facts, it's not our brother, it's not our sister, but it's me, O Lord, standing in the need of prayer. And while it is an easy out for me to identify my own sins in other people's lives--which I find very easy to do, Oh, look at that dreadful driver! Oh, look at that person! I see my own sins magnified most in other people--the exhortation of Jesus to the disciples here is to make sure that they are checking themselves. And there are four particular areas in which the check is to take place.

When you listen in on the pilot and co-pilot, again, in an airliner, you know that they go through a fairly systematic checking procedure. And so they read from their manual, and the person who is on the responding mode who is checking the instrumentation, when they read 1, he says, check, and 2, check, check, check, check, all the way through. It's very, very important.

Why? To preserve their own safety and the safety of those who are in their care. So when Jesus says, I want you to conduct the check, it is for the very same reason--to make sure that, first of all, we are in check, then that in turn we may be able to have an impact on others. Now, what I'd like to do in order to help us come to terms with this passage is to turn the directors of Jesus into four straightforward questions, each of which I think emerges clearly from the text.

And the first question is this, on the basis of what he says in verses 1 and 2--and this is on the test for all of us--check mark number one, Am I causing others to sin? Am I causing others to sin? Now, Jesus is very straightforward. You'll notice he says, Things that cause people to sin are bound to come. It's ridiculous for us to think that we can live in a world where we're not confronted by that which tempts us to sin, to wrongdoing, to wrong thinking, etc.

There are pitfalls, and there are stumbling blocks on the pathway that each of us faces each day we live our lives. Jesus says, I recognize that. But I want to say to you, Woe to the person who by their life digs those holes, creates those stumbling blocks.

Nobody can misunderstand what he is saying. It is possessed of absolute clarity. It is also marked by a striking gravity.

If you think that I am saying something that is overstated, said Jesus, you're not listening carefully. It would be better for an individual to be thrown into the sea with a millstone--which is a giant stone that was used in the grinding process--with a millstone tied around their neck than for that individual to be the cause of one of these little disciples to sin. People say, Well, is this a reference to children, or is it--what is it? We can't say with clarity.

It certainly applies to children. You're gonna cause children to sin? This definitely fits you. If it is a reference to those who are marginal, who are fledgling in the discipleship journey, those who are publicans and sinners and who have so recently come to follow Christ, now he says, Are you gonna put a stumbling block in the way of these little ones? You'd be better to be drowned in the Cuyahoga River than to face the punishment that awaits those who are prepared to live loose to the Scriptures in this respect.

Now, you say, That is a strikingly grave statement. Well, of course it is. When he issues the same exhortation at the beginning of chapter 12--and you can go back to this for homework, you needn't turn to it--when he says, I want you to watch out for the yeast of the Pharisees, beware that, he then goes on to speak in very similar terms.

He says to his disciples, I don't want you to be afraid of those who kill the body, but instead you should fear him who, after the killing of the body, has the power to throw you into hell. So here is Jesus, the loving, beautiful, wonderful Savior, speaking about the reality of hell in such a way, number one, that he recognizes its reality, number two, that he is aware of its gravity, and number three, that that truth should so impinge upon the minds of his listeners that they recognize that what he's saying here is eternal in its implications. Am I causing people to sin? Am I causing my kids to sin? Am I causing my brothers and sisters in the Christian life to sin? Do my words induce them to sin? Does my lifestyle induce them to sin? Is there anything about what I do that is digging a hole for their feet? Is the way I spend time with my girlfriend--I'm speaking in the third person now, as you know, I have a wife--is the way--this is a generic question for all--is the way you spend time with your girlfriend, fellow, causing a stumbling block, are you going to cause her to sin? Do your feet go places that may dig a hole for others? Does your mind give you words that dig a hole for others? If the answer is yes, if you're about to dig a big hole for somebody to fall in, he says, it would actually be better before you get to that if you died a horrible death.

Because that would be much easier to deal with than the prospect of the judgment that awaits such activity. Well, you say, that is absolutely incredible! Well, Jesus was very clear about it, indeed, in Mark's Gospel. As Mark records these incidents, he contains the passage where Jesus says, you know, in relationship to yourself, if your eye is offending, you just pluck it out.

It's a metaphor. If your hand is offending you, chop it off. If your feet are offending you, chop them off.

What is he saying? Not that the key to spirituality is for a lot of blind people to be going around in wheelchairs. He is saying, the metaphor is clear. Don't go down that road in your mind.

Don't go there with your hands. Don't go there with your feet. And remember that if you cause another person to stumble and fall into sin, it would actually be better that you were drowned in the sea.

Well, you say, well, I mean, in what areas could it happen? Well, it could happen in any area. By my indifference, I may provide a stumbling block to those who know me. They say, you know, he's just a sham.

His religious observation is out there or it's up there, but it's not heart religious observation. He's indifferent to the things of God. And I've watched him, and I know that he is.

And as a result of that, he's actually caused me to stumble into the same situation. I, frankly, couldn't care less. The stumbling block not only of indifference, but the stumbling block of idolatry--the kind of idolatry that Jesus has been addressing here in these previous sections, where the rich man has no interest in the poor, where he regards himself as a self-made man, where he worships himself and his own dealings rather than worshipping God--a stumbling block of immorality.

For none of us lives to himself alone, and none of us dies to himself alone. As Phillips paraphrases it, the truth is that we neither live or die as self-contained units. Despite the fact that America teaches us that the individual is God, you know, that you're your own destiny, that it's only about you and about what you

believe and what you decide and where you're going and everything else, that is absolutely bogus.

Because the fact of the matter is, all of us are completely hinged to one another in some way, good or ill, and God has determined that within the framework of the body of Christ, it should be that way in order that just as brothers and sisters in a family can watch out and care for one another so that in God's family the same thing can happen. Ask yourself the question, Am I causing others to sin? That's the first thing on the test. And in James 3, remember, James says, Let not many of you become teachers, for he who teaches will be judged with greater strictness.

So for all of you who think that the apex of Christian living is teaching a Bible study, don't be so fast to jump on it. I'm flying on a plane the other day, and in the same context as I just described, the fellow in front of us kept turning around, especially in the first ten or fifteen minutes. I thought he was checking to see if the flaps were up.

It was a kind of decrepit 727, and you remember how those flaps come up on those things. I was kind of concerned they were up myself, but eventually they were up, but he still kept turning around. And I thought it was because I was quoting people like Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan, and we were having a high old time talking politics, but eventually he leant over and he said, Are you on the radio? And I said, Yeah.

And then we had a little conversation, and it was nice. But I also got a note a few months ago from somebody who heard me in action as well at the Continental desk at Hopkins, when I wasn't charmed by the fact that they wanted seventy-five dollars to transport my golf clubs. And in the course of letting the person know how I thought it wasn't a very good idea, apparently I caused some anonymous person to stumble, who then wrote to me saying, You're great on the radio, but you stink at the Continental counter.

Who wants to sign up for this? It'd be better that a millstone was hung around your neck and you were drowned in the sea than that you caused people, by means of your lifestyle or your words, to fall into the pit. Am I causing others to sin? Secondly, am I learning to forgive? Am I learning to forgive? Watch yourselves. Don't cause people to sin.

Watch yourselves. And if your brother sins, take action. The follower of Jesus is to be diligent.

This kind of compassion is not weakness. He's not talking about fostering an indifference to evil. Consequently, he says, if your brother is sinning, rebuke him.

Rebuke him! Of course, if people say, Well, what right do I have to rebuke anybody? Well, you have a responsibility to rebuke him. Yeah, but I can't say anything, because after all, you know, who am I? You're you! And the whole point of this is that this is a self-purifying principle. Because if I am going to identify in the lives of others sin, I'm surely gonna identify it in myself.

Therefore, I'm gonna have to be dealing with it here if we're gonna be dealing with it there. Now, in Matthew chapter 18--I'd like to turn you to it for just a moment, because it's germane to what we're facing this evening at the communion service--Jesus says in Matthew 18, 15, that if your brother sins against you, you should go and show him his fault. Matthew 18, 15.

Notice the phrase that closes out the sentence, Just between the two of you. Now, you gotta get that, get your highlighter highlighted in fifteen colors. Underline it seventeen times.

Do you see it? Just between the two of you. What is it that causes factions, cliques, disruption within the church? It is the identification of wrongdoing, and then further wrongdoing compounds the wrongdoing as a result of the individual being unwilling to do the brave biblical thing. In other words, go to your brother and talk to him.

The average way it happens is, someone offends against another person, party B offends against A, A refuses to go to B, A instead goes to C, B then goes to D, and so, by an exponential growth process, you have this divergence between people. Now, all we need to do is what the Bible says. Go to the person.

Settle it yourselves. Now, this happens to me. I remember not so long ago--well, actually, it is quite a long time ago, now I'm getting much older--but one of the elders called me up and said, you know, last night at the meeting, he said, You know, when you said X to Y, that was no good.

I mean, what you said was true, but the way you said it was bad. And you offended me, and I'm sure you hurt him. And so I'm calling you to ask you to phone him up and get it sorted out, and then phone me back and tell me that you did it.

So I put the phone down for a moment. I had a little talk to myself, like, Hey, I'm the pastor of the church. What are you talking about? That lasted about a nanosecond.

And I said, Yeah, that's right. So I phoned the guy up. I said, Sorry, I phoned the other guy up.

I said, Did it? I left a message. He phoned me back and said, It's fine. Let's move on.

It's over. Instead of it becoming the Third World War, right? Now, if it doesn't get cleaned up in that way, then the instruction is very clear. If your brother listens to you, as in this instance, then you've won him over and we can keep in the battle.

If, however, that does not happen, you go get two others and take them along so that, as in the Old Testament, every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses. That is why you should not hear an accusation against an elder without, says the New Testament, the accompanying testimony to the validity of what's being said. So the presence of these individuals is simply to say, I came to you and I mentioned X, you refused to listen, and I'm back here with two of your buddies who feel the exact same way.

And what we're saying to you is, Please don't do this. Or please turn from this. Or please respond in this way.

And if, as a result, the individual listens to you, then you've won your brother over--end of the story--back in the battle and keep marching. But if he does not listen, if she does not listen and refuses to do so, then tell it to the church. Why would you tell it to the church? Is this a punishment? No, it's a purifying principle.

Who cares for the individual like the church? They committed themselves to be a part of the church. They said, This is my home. This is where I want to be shepherded.

This is where I want to be taught. This is where I want to be nurtured. This is where I want to be guided.

Here are my friends. Here are my loved ones. These people matter to me.

I care for them. We are united in an eternal bond. Fine.

Then we've got to tell your family so that your family then can pray for you so that the thing that you're unprepared to respond to at the moment, you may respond to, and you may be restored. Hence the rebuke. And the rebuke in the tough love is to produce repentance in order that there might be change and in order that there might be forgiveness.

And if, in turn, they refuse even to listen to the church, then they should be treated as you would treat a pagan or a tax collector. How would you treat them? As people that need to know the redeeming love of the Lord Jesus. Reaching out to them with the news of forgiveness.

Reaching out to them with the message of salvation. Now, go back with me, if you would, then, to Luke chapter 17. The disciple of Jesus needs to be honest and straightforward, calling attention to wrong behavior rather than slandering the individual behind their back.

And where there is repentance, there will be forgiveness. And so the believer mustn't be the kind of person who bears grudges. Instead, he must be the forgiving person.

And so he says, if he sins against you seven times in a day and seven times comes back to you and says, I repent, then forgive him. Well, does that mean that if he goes over the top and goes to the eighth time, the eighth time you don't have to forgive him? So you keep a little ledger. Seven? You're coming up to seven.

You do one more, you're on your own. No, that's not what he's saying. It's simply a picture.

He says your approach should be a continual and habitual forgiveness. Forgiveness is not a feeling. It's a promise.

People tell me all the time, I can't forgive. It's not that you can't forgive, it's that you won't forgive. If I forgive somebody something, then at least this is involved.

One, if I say to you, I forgive you, then I'm telling you that I will not bring the matter up to you again. I will not bring it up to you again. I'm forgiving you.

Secondly, I want you to know that I will not bring the matter up with anybody else again. You may be sure that if you see me talking in the grocery store to Mrs. So-and-so that I am not talking about you, and I am not talking about that incident, because I told you I forgave you. I'm not talking to you about it again, and I'm not talking to them about it again, and I'm not talking to myself about it again.

So if you see me staring off into space, you may be sure that I am not regurgitating the incident that involved you and me, concerning which there had to be rebuke, repentance, and forgiveness. Now, when that happens, it is liberating, it is life-transforming, and people can move on. But people say, you know, if I can't forget, I'm not going to forgive.

Well, let me tell you something. If you won't forgive, I can guarantee you, you will never forget. If you forgive, there is a possibility that you may forget.

But if you decide that you cannot forgive until you forget, then welcome to the subterranean tunnels of your own bitter heart. Live there for the rest of your sorry lives. Breathe the gases.

Live with its obnoxious influence. And as a result, be totally impervious to the truth of God's Word and the exhortations of his people. Who wants to live there? Who wants to live in a dungeon of our own creation?

Now, you know that I've begun listening to Willie Nelson again.

The Bible says you should confess your sins to one another, so I may as well. And the other day, I was listening to a great song, and I'm not gonna sing it to you. You can relax.

But the line is, Forgiving you is easy. Forgetting seems to take the longest time. That's right! That's honest! Those are the facts! God in himself possesses the capacity to choose to remember our sins no more.

We don't! Therefore, unless we have a frontal lobotomy, we're stuck with the fact that things come back across the screen. But every time you see it coming across the screen, hit it the way you hit that thing that says, No thanks! on your computer. Okay? No thanks! No thanks! No thanks! No thanks! And eventually, somewhere out in cyberspace, we'll get a message.

I don't need to keep offering that stuff to him. He always says, No thanks! So when the devil comes and he drags around in the garbage cans of sins that have been forgiven and goes rustling around in your past and brings things up in front of your face, hit the delete button immediately. No thanks! I have determined to forgive.

I will not bring it up to myself. I will not bring it up to another. And I will not bring it up to you.

It's on the test. Am I causing others to sin? Secondly, am I learning to forgive? And incidentally, the sphere of our forgiveness, the circle of confession, needs to be no larger than the circle of offense. Don't go around confessing to everybody every wrong thought you've ever had about them.

Seneca, the Roman, said, If everybody knew what everybody else said about them, there wouldn't be two friends in the whole universe. That's the truth! That's the absolute truth! So, if what you're gonna start doing now, as a result of some mismanagement of the text of Scripture, is go around sharing with everybody in the congregation the sin that remains in your heart, that is actually known only to God and known to yourself, well, it should be confessed to God alone. Confessions of lust, of anger, of envy to a person totally unaware of what you're thinking is not liberating.

It actually can lead to further sin and unnecessary hurt. Do you understand this? I'm always suspicious of people who come to me and say, Well, I just feel that I have a few matters to clean up. I want to tell you all the heinous things I've been thinking about you for the last six years.

I say, Oh, spare me that, please. If you could tell God that, that would be wonderful. But please don't tell me, because I'm about overloaded, thinking about the heinous things I know about myself, without knowing all the things that you feel you've got to mention to me.

Can you imagine how long we'd have to stay here today if everybody started off? We'd just go on a line. Why don't we put ten up the front, and I'll come forward? Okay, heinous thought number one through 580, over here on the right, and on and on and on and on and on. The sphere of offense, if it is private, should remain private.

The sphere of offense, if it is public, needs to be dealt with in a public fashion. That is why the Bible says that if an elder sins publicly, if he is open and flagrant in his sin, therefore he should be rebuked publicly. Now, don't start charging around here, babbling and brooding, because your secret sins should be confessed secretly to God, and your private sins should be confessed privately to the injured party.

This isn't easy, is it? I don't find it easy. David Livingston, who was on the receiving end of all kinds of slanderous accusations because he went in time to Africa without his wife, they said that because his wife wasn't present, it was because of the disintegration in his marital status and so on, none of which was true. He was concerned because of the brutality of the circumstances in Africa that his wife would not be harmed by it.

Therefore, he left her at home until he could conclude that it was safe for her to come. And twenty years after all of the hurt, through the malicious gossip and the idle talk, in writing to a friend, he wrote these words, I often think I have forgiven, as I hope to be forgiven. But the remembrance of the slander often comes boiling up, although I hate to think of it.

You must remember me in your prayer, that more of the Spirit of Christ may be imparted to me. Granting forgiveness is not some kind of shallow, oh, it's just okay, forget it, it doesn't matter. The granting of forgiveness is directly related to a repentant heart.

In other words, Jesus--hopefully the listeners were putting together the things that he was saying, and he had already told them the story of the prodigal, and he says, Now, I want to make sure that you, when you have a repentant brother, forgive him. And their minds would have said, Oh, you mean like the way the father treated the boy rather than the way the brother treated his brother? Jesus said, That's exactly right. I've sinned against heaven, and in your sight I'm no longer worthy to be called your son.

Hey, let's have a party. This is fantastic. And the elder brother refused to go into the dancing.

Why? Because he was a Pharisee. He refused. Now, there's just two more, and I'll mention them quickly, and we're done.

Question one, Am I causing others to sin? Question two, Am I learning to forgive? Question three, Am I living by faith? When he finishes these statements, the disciples say to him, Increase our faith! You can imagine them looking at one another going, Oh, man, we need help here! Increase our faith! And Jesus' response makes it clear that they don't need more faith. They just need the right kind of faith. They need vigorous living faith.

As one has said, it's not so much great faith in God that is required as faith in a great God. And once again, look at the picture Jesus uses. If you've got faith as small as a mustard seed--the tiniest seed planted by a Palestinian farmer--you can say to this mulberry tree, Up and into the sea, and it will obey you.

The mulberry tree the rabbis held had roots that would remain in the earth for six hundred years, so firmly rooted that to remove it would be very difficult. And Jesus decides to take these two pictures and put them together. He says, If you've got faith like a mustard seed, as tiny as you can hardly see it, you can say to a rooted tree that has got the potential to live in the ground for six hundred years, Hey, jump in the sea, and it will jump in the sea.

Now, what is Jesus teaching? Is this advice for horticultural students? Is this advice on how to rearrange the vegetation in your seascape cottage? Clearly not! It's a picture! And the people always want to say, Well, you know, you don't really believe in this kind of faith. If you believed in this kind of faith, then this would happen and that would happen. Listen, the people who tell me all about that, I never saw one of them yet take a mulberry tree and chuck it in the sea.

Oh, yes, we believe the Bible. We believe that what Jesus said he meant. Well, do you believe that what he was saying was you're supposed to be able to walk up to mulberry trees and throw them in the sea? Is that what he's saying? Clearly not! He is using a picture.

He's saying, If you have childlike trust in the promises of God, then you can be involved in that which so clearly overturns our dependence upon reason and upon probability and upon experience. And the disciples, of course, as they listened to him speak, were about to discover post-Pentecost just how dramatic what he was saying would prove to be. Well, let's turn to the final question, because our time is gone.

The last question is, Am I doing my duty? Am I doing my duty? Don't be put off by this little parable in verses 7-10. Don't read it through your twenty-first-century eyes, first of all. Try and read it in the context of the time, which is the context of leverage and obligation.

Throughout Luke, Jesus had been pointing out that people like to live in such a way as to put people in a spirit of obligation to them. So, if I do this, then you'll have to do this in response. That's why he said, If you love those that love you, what reward do you have? There's no big deal in that.

If you give to people who can give a party at their house that is equally as good as yours, it's not wrong, but it's no big deal. But if you will take and give to those who cannot give in return, then your reward will be eternal rather than immediate. In other words, he's turning lifestyles upside down.

And it is in that context that he then asks this question. Don't misunderstand it when he asks the question in verse 9, Would he thank the servant because he did what he was told to do? What he means is not, Would he say thank you to him? or Would he violate social politeness? What he is saying is this. Does the master come to owe the servant special privileges because the servant fulfills his daily responsibilities? A servant who simply completes his work efficiently doesn't place his master under any obligation to reward him.

Now, what's Jesus doing? Well, he's addressing the tendency on the part of the servants--his servants--to start to feel that they might be entitled to some special marks of honor. Oh, we are the servants of Jesus. We are the followers of Jesus.

Remember, he said, Beware of the yeast of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy. They like it when people say, My, my! They like it when they say, Great prayer, Pharisee! They like it when they say, Oh, I saw you in such-and-such a place! He says, Beware of all of that stuff. Beware of falling into the idea that somehow or another, because you do your duty in relationship to me, that somehow or another you obligate me to you--that I, as your master, am now responsible somehow to provide you with special benefits and indications.

The fulfillment of the responsibility of the servant of Christ is to be exercised in humility. For all the love that we may show, all the strength that we may know, all the time that we may give, all the faithfulness that we may express is nothing other than Christ's gift to us. Because we can't get up in the morning without his enablement.

We can't speak without his facility. We can't hear without his divine provision. We can't understand unless he opens the eyes of our hearts.

We cannot serve him unless he enables us. So do you think, then, that when we've done our duty, at the end of the day we're supposed to stand around and wait for the special accolades to be given out? Do you think that the rewards will be given out on the basis of how well we've done? Rewards will be an indication of God's grace as well. There is little doubt.

And people write to me, and they say things, and I'm sure they do to you as well--I forgive a personal allusion and conclusion here--but people write to me, and they say, Thank you for allowing God to use you. I cannot theologize that sentence. I don't know what that means.

I mean, is somebody actually saying that God can't use somebody unless the somebody allows God to use them? So then, presumably, the somebody is stronger than God--that God is paralyzed until the somebody gets to the point where they are prepared to allow God to use them, thus exalting the individual and diminishing God. In fact, the real question is, how in the wide world is it that one has been given the privilege of being allowed to serve him? The mystery is not that any one of us has, quote, allowed God to use us. The mystery is that any one of us has been granted the privilege of being allowed to be used.

Do you see how easily our ugly pride jumps up, and we're standing waiting for the awards to be given out? Faithful service, faithful preaching, faithful this, faithful that. Here we are, just waiting for it to come. Jesus says, Do you think that we should be having some big celebration just because you do your duty? Don't you realize that at the end of the day, you're an unworthy servant? That when you've had your best day, you're not that good? That's what he's saying.

And any goodness you possess is the goodness that I supply. Now let me give you a final thing, and I'm done--definitely done. I just came from a conference in Colorado that was for musicians--all kinds of musicians, people that you would know, people whose albums you buy, CDs you listen to, and on the radio, and in contemporary Christian music, and some that crosses over into the secular world.

And it was a wonderful time and a privilege to be there and everything else. And I was listening to all the industry talk about contractual obligations and the prices for concerts and the different bits and pieces on CDs and who gets what and everything else, and I was saying to myself, you know, I really missed the boat here. I should have been a singer.

But having heard myself sing, I can't be a singer, so we'll just have to stick with what I've got. But I was listening to all of these things and just remarking on it to myself. And as I walked out after my final talk, I noticed that there was a big sign, and it said, teaching tapes available here, seven dollars a tape.

Well, I said to myself, seven bucks a pop for my tapes! I wonder why no one asked me about that. I wonder why I never signed a release for that. I wonder what would happen if they bootlegged one of the music groups and sold them for seven bucks a pop at a table when they were going out the door.

I wonder what the management would say, I wonder what the industry would say, I wonder what the agent would say, and so on. Because after all, that's their intellectual property. So I'm saying to myself, well, I've got intellectual property.

I mean, it may not be that intellectual, but at least it comes under the heading intellectual property. And I'm not getting any! Now, there were only six tapes sold, I think, apparently, so it only amounts to forty-two dollars, and only a Scotsman could get concerned over that. But while I was thinking this way, then I got back to the passage for today.

And Jesus said, What are you concerned about? Your best day, you're an unworthy servant. Don't you remember what Paul said in 1 Corinthians 9? When I preach the gospel, I cannot boast, for I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel! If I preach voluntarily, I have a reward.

In other words, if I said, Excuse me, I'd like to volunteer as a preacher, then, yeah, you may be able to get a reward for that, because after all, it was you that initiated the thing, you were prepared to give your time, and so on. If I preach voluntarily, I have a reward. If not voluntarily, I am simply discharging the trust committed to me.

What then is my reward? Just this, that in the preaching of the gospel I may offer it free of charge and so not make use of my rights in preaching it. Then that was just like that. Go to your room and think about that for a while, beg.

And up the flagpole of HMS Victory, Sir Admiral Lord Nelson sends the word to all the vessels in the fleet, Today England expects every man to do his duty. And here, with the fleet assembled and ready to go out into the seas again for another week, Jesus sends the flags up the lanyard. Jesus expects every man and woman to do their duty.

Are you ready? Take to the sea. Rescue the perishing. Care for the dying.

Tell them of Jesus. He's mighty to save. Let us pray.

Lord God, when we ask, Am I causing others to sin? the answer is yes. Inadvertently often--hopefully not willfully--but Lord, forgive us. Are we learning to forgive? Too slowly, we fear.

Lord, we believe. Help our unbelief. Are we living by faith? Well, so often we're absent that childlike trust that takes you at your word with our future and with our relationships and with our fears and our families and so on.

Help us, Lord. And are we doing our duty? Well, we want to be. We know you expect us all to do so by your divine enabling.

And so, may the grace of the Lord Jesus and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit descend upon us each one today and be with us in the days that lie before us, until the day when we see you face to face, and then forevermore. Amen. That concludes this message.

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