



Spiritual Food

Rev. David Fekete
October 2, 2016



Scripture Readings

Lamentations 1:1-6

Luke 17:5-10

Psalm 37

This morning's New Testament reading strikes me as rather harsh and distasteful. There's that concluding line,

So you also, when you have done all that you were ordered to do, say, 'We are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done!'" (Luke 17:10)

Wow! I'm not sure I like the idea that I'm supposed to think I'm a worthless slave. What are we to make of this story?

The story has us as the owner of slaves. Then, after the slave comes in from plowing or tending sheep, we order them to serve us our meal. And after we eat, we let them eat. Then comes that final line. The slaves say, "We are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done!" Since this story comes after the Apostles ask Jesus to increase their faith, aren't we supposed to take this as a parable about increasing our faith? In this case, Jesus is the slave owner and we are the slaves.

I was so perplexed by this story that I checked out another translation. I looked at the Revised Standard Version, since the version I read this morning was the New Revised Standard Version. In the other translation, the slaves are servants. But given the New Testament times, slaves would be the more accurate translation. But that last line is a little easier for me to deal with in the RSV.

So you also, when you have done all that is commanded you, say, "We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty."

To my mind, there is a big difference between being unworthy and being worthless. Being unworthy means we don't deserve the good things we get. Being worthless has negative connotations. It means a person who has no self-esteem and is a good-for nothing. I like the idea of doing what is my duty even without being thanked. But maybe I have authority issues, but I recoil at being ordered to do anything.

I'm OK with being unworthy. I think of Psalm 130:3-4:

If thou, O Lord, shouldst mark iniquities,

Lord, who could stand?

But there is forgiveness with thee,

that thou mayest be feared.¹

The fact is, if any of us were judged by our shortcomings, as the psalm says, none of us could stand. In this sense we are undeserving. We don't deserve God's gift of salvation. But God does love us, forgive us, lift us up out of our sins into heavenly happiness and joy.

This brings up the imagery of plowing and tending sheep. And it moves us into the part of the story that deals with eating the meal. We are helped to understand this story when we consider Swedenborg's correspondences, or Biblical symbols. The story turns on the symbolism of food.

Food means our emotional life. It means the things we love. Being fed means indulging our emotions. This is a good thing to do if we are spiritually advanced and have healthy, heavenly emotions. If we have pure thoughts, healthy feelings, good will, if we are friendly and affectionate. It's not such a good thing when we're still a work in progress. Not such a good thing if we have unhealthy cravings, selfish demands, feelings of superiority, if we're mean, cold hearted.

Paul talks about this difference. He distinguishes between works of the flesh and works of the Spirit.

Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such

¹ Carroll, Robert P., and Stephen Prickett. *The Bible: Authorized King James Version*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.

things. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit (Galatians 5:19-25).

This is how I take the whole slave thing in a symbolic way. When we are out plowing and tending sheep, we are working on our salvation. We are struggling with those works of the flesh. We are trying to overcome our shortcomings. We are working on our character defects. We are trying to let our Higher Power rule in our lives. Make no mistake—this is a struggle

If we are in that struggle, we certainly don't want to be fed! We don't want the feelings and pleasures that come from an undeveloped spirituality. When I was drinking, what I wanted, what I always wanted, was to be fed—to be fed more alcohol. It's the same with other cravings of an undeveloped spirituality. When we're in them, we want more and more of those works of the flesh, fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these.

Now none of us has all these things. But as Paul says, "Things like these." That's how I take the demand to be fed when we come straight from plowing or tending sheep.

What Jesus is telling us is to devote ourselves to feeding God, and the God within us. Serving God is doing the things that God commands us. And God doesn't order us around. If He did, we would all rebel and turn away from God in anger. Rather, God gently bends us toward good feelings and good deeds. God invites us to join with Him in heaven

When we do the spiritual work that leads to a better life, then we are in a position to eat spiritual food. Serving the master means doing the work of spiritual reformation. It means asking God into our hearts. And when we have God in our hearts, then the food we eat will be healthy food. Not spiritual junk food. Then we will want healthy, affirming, humble, generous feelings toward everyone on the planet. That's also what is meant by Jesus' words in Revelation 3:20:

*Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me.*²

² 'New Revised Standard Version Bible: Anglicized Edition, copyright 1989, 1995, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.'

