

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church Des Moines, WA September 1, 2013

Luke 17:1-10

Increase Our Faith!

1. Why we need to pray this
2. How the Lord answers this

Hymns: 226 – 454

Distribution: 423, 391 –

Closing: 316

All Scripture quotations from NIV 1984

Luke 17:1-10 –

1 Jesus said to his disciples: "Things that cause people to sin are bound to come, but woe to that person through whom they come. 2 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. 3 So watch yourselves. "If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him. 4 If he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times comes back to you and says, 'I repent,' forgive him." 5 The apostles said to the LORD, "Increase our faith!" 6 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. 7 "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'? 8 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'? 9 Would he thank the servant because he did what he was told to do? 10 So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.' "

In some sermon texts, the main lesson is evident quite easily. Perhaps there are some details that need to be explained or some background that needs to be taught, but often the main point is clear as the reading is read.

For example, last week Pastor Voss preached on the Ten Lepers. Background can be given in the skin disease called leprosy and the process through which an Israelite would become fit for society again, but the main lesson that many of you know is that it teaches us about thankfulness as the one leper returned to thank Jesus.

If you read the story of the Fall in Genesis 3, background can be given on the two trees in the Garden of Eden and the command of the LORD God, but you know the main thrust of the story: The sorrow and effects of sin corrupt our world because of man's own fault.

However, today's story doesn't seem to be so cut and dried. Did you sense that as we read the reading? It seems to be a "shotgun" reading that sprays a number of thoughts out there that are all valid and edifying, but don't seem to be all that connected. Yet a close examination of this reading will show otherwise. Let's walk through the Gospel reading for today and see how it fits together under the theme that the disciples prayed to Jesus: **"Lord, Increase our Faith!"**

1. Why we need to pray this

As the words of our text begin, Jesus is teaching his disciples. There are a few different lessons he would like them to learn. He said, *"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."*

To understand this, it's helpful to know the original word for "things that cause people to sin." In Greek, it's SKANDALIZO. You might hear the word "scandal" in it. If we English-ize this word, we could say we should not "scandalize" other people. One sense of the word is a trap that is set to spring unexpectedly. The trap is a sin that a person can fall into, and Jesus is teaching his disciples that they should not lead other people on in a way that will lead them into sin. The other picture that can be used for this word is a "stumbling block." The picture is that stumbling would be the sin. The

New Testament commands us not to put stumbling blocks in the path of others so that our behavior causes them to sin. Don't be the tempter. Temptations are all around us in the world, Jesus says, but you should not be the one who is the tempter. Don't offend others by your questionable speech or actions. Don't use language that is a bit vulgar and worldly, so that those around you think it's cool and start using it too. Especially, don't cause young ones to stumble in their life of faith. If so, it would be better to be at the bottom of the ocean with a rock tied to your neck!

Jesus' then teaches a second lesson: ***"If your brother sins, rebuke him."*** That seems easy enough, doesn't it? If you have a fellow believer who has strayed and fallen into a sinful pattern or lifestyle, you are to speak up about it to him. It's interesting that the word for "rebuke" that Jesus uses here actually comes from the root word that means "to honor." The sense of it is that you respect, honor, and value that person so much that you need to do something about his situation. You feel too much honor to let him or her continue on in their sinful pattern without you saying something.

Jesus gives a third teaching: ***"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."*** You might have heard Jesus teach this in other accounts as well. The disciples are not to withhold forgiveness when someone sins against them and then returns and repents. They are to forgive. And they are to repeatedly forgive when they are sinned against!

So, what is the disciples' reaction to Jesus' teaching that day? ***"Increase our faith!"*** Why would they pray for an increase of faith? Can you relate?

Let's look at these same lessons in our day and age:

- Don't be offending to other people. Don't be sinning in front of them; rather, be a perfect example. **Lord, increase our faith!**

Parents, uncles, aunts, grandparents, teachers, how has your Christian example been in front of children? I don't see many movies, but I know a lot of America is going to them. I know many children are going to them as well. Movies have different descriptions given to them by which they are ranked: Adult themes, profanity, violence, drug use, sensuality, amount of nudity, and so on. Such descriptions should raise a Christian parent's eyebrows to begin with. One movie theater in a mall had a sign by an "R" rated movie: "Think before taking your kids." Really? You have to think about this? Can the sponge-like mind of a child or teenager really not come away affected by such things? Can they hear profanity and not be affected by it? Can they see risqué outfits and behavior and not copy it? Think again. But I fear there are many parents who bring their children to movies that affect their values, language, violence levels, and so on. And if you are the cause of leading them to offense, stop by the mill and pick up a stone on the way home, the Lord Jesus says!

What about your own behavior? How have you handled frustration and anger in front of them? Have you been a perfect example to them? How has your language been? How have you reacted when someone wronged you and they were observing your behavior? Fathers and mothers, have you had heated discussions in front of the kids that you later knew were a bad example? And have you always exhibited honesty and a law-abiding spirit in front of them? Or have you led them to break the rules? ***"Lord, increase our faith!"***

- What about rebuking our sinning brother or sister in the faith? It seems like an easy concept that we should speak up about their sinful behavior,

but is it really easy? Is it something that you would look forward to and look for an opportunity to do? Who wants to talk to the uncle who has a problem with profanity? He probably won't react well to that. Perhaps he's going to throw some of his words your way! Who wants to bring up the adult family member's sparse attendance at worship and communion? They just might reject you with a quick, "Who are you to judge me?" Who wants to bring up your relative's situation where he is living with his girlfriend without being rightfully married? You just might cause a rift in the family! **"Lord, increase our faith!"**

- Then there's the matter of forgiveness. You might struggle to forgive someone who has hurt you once. But seven times in a day?! Imagine that! We don't have to think this is someone who is even repeating the same sin against you and making a mockery of repentance, but what if they always seem to be doing this or that in a callous, selfish way and in one day hurt your feelings seven times, but express their regret and repentance. This is easy to do? **"Lord, increase our faith!"**

We realize the depth of our need for an increase of faith when we see that there are many more commandments and sins that Jesus could have brought up: Jealousy, greed, lust, and more. Ten commandments' worth of our failures! They all lead us to pray the same prayer as the disciples, because we deserve the millstone around our neck. We deserve the wrath and judgment of God. **"Lord, increase our faith!"**

2. How Jesus answers this

After the apostles asked this of Jesus, he answered them. 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.*"** What did he mean by that?

This is not a complement. You might know that the mustard seed was one of the smallest seeds that farmers used. It was very small! Yet Jesus told them that if faith is only that big, it does mighty things. **His point is that these are not big assignments!** They are not big assignments – not because of our power – but because of the power that faith connects us to, namely the Lord God himself.

Perhaps you remember the list of good works in Matthew 25 that the King (Jesus) will point to in the last judgment, which are the evidence that people have faith. He will pronounce a favorable judgment of salvation on them because *"I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me... Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me."* Jesus did not say that the evidence of their faith was that they swam across the ocean, that they performed previously unheard-of science experiments, or that they invented microwave cooking! He says that they did simple acts of kindness to those in the fellowship of believers. They helped their Christian brother who needed it. They gave him food. They visited him.

In the same way, today's reading speaks of simple acts that really should not be a big assignment. Forgive your brother. Be a good example. Talk to your fellow believer who is straying from the faith.

Perhaps we could compare the apostles' attitude to a JV sports team on the first day of practice. The coach tells them to take a lap to start the practice. After they're done, they complain greatly to the coach about their tired legs and extreme effort in running a lap, and he says, "That's just the basics!" That was no big, complex assignment, and they'd better realize it.

We see why it's not a "big assignment" for believers when we realize the motivation we have to forgive our brother and to be a godly example to others. When we were lost in sin and death, we had One who completed a big assignment. We needed a Savior, or else we were doomed in hell forever. Jesus Christ came to earth to fulfill God's commandments perfectly. He always welcomed the little children. He always spoke up about sin at the proper time. He forgave, even forgiving the soldiers who nailed him to the cross! **He kept all of God's commands and laws when we could not, and he did it as our substitute!**

Then he went to the cross to suffer and die for the sin and guilt that we possessed. For all the times we have made others stumble, showed a lack of forgiveness, been jealous, petty, hating, and lustful, Jesus paid that price and won our forgiveness before our heavenly Father. And now... we forgive our brother and we let our light shine as a godly example. Those actions don't earn us forgiveness; that's already been done. But they show our genuine faith in the One who served as our Savior.

Jesus had one more response for the apostles when they said, "Lord, increase our faith!" He also said, *"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 have done everything you were told to do, should say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.' "*

What does this mean? The point is simple: **This is simply your place in the big picture. Your Call to Duty are the things that Jesus was describing that we should do.**

Jesus seems to have a pretty strong illustration of a slave in a field, by which he taught them. Perhaps we could relate to some modern-day illustrations a bit better. If you go out to eat at a restaurant and the host is leading

you to your table, have any of you ever stopped them and said, "Hold it. Have you eaten? Perhaps you should eat first." And how many of you have had a waiter who was taking care of your needs and you voiced concern with whether he had taken his break? Aren't people usually saying things like, "We could use some more napkins." "My food was a bit cold; can you take care of that?" And, "You forgot the lemon in my wife's water!" Why don't we think twice about saying those things? Because we are paying for that service, which our waiter is supposed to be performing!

In the same way, when school starts this week I don't think many parents are going to be telling their children, "I'd really like to thank you for attending school today. And I really would like to thank you for doing homework this first week." Why not? That is their place. They are a student!

Jesus said that these things are what we naturally do because it is our place. We are not doing more than our Creator has simply created us to do as his servants. We have been taken from slavery to sin and death and have been made members of God's kingdom. We have not been made the Master or the King. We do not make the commandments or call the shots. God the Master does. **Following his ways in love, thanks, and gratefulness is our place and our joy, for we realize how far his grace has brought us!**

This also keeps us in the proper perspective when we feel we should get kudos and compliments for our great good works and our service to God's kingdom.

So finally, may we pray, **"Lord, increase our faith!"** When we look at the commands of God that we are to follow and obey, it certainly can lead us to pray that along with the apostles. As we do so, may we show our faith in our examples and our forgiving spirit because of the forgiveness Jesus has won for us. And in the end, may we say, *"We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty."* Amen.