

Theme: Unworthy servants made worthy to serve
Text: Luke 17:1-10

17 Jesus said to his disciples: “Things that cause people to stumble are bound to come, but woe to anyone through whom they come. ² It would be better for them to be thrown into the sea with a millstone tied around their neck than to cause one of these little ones to stumble. ³ So watch yourselves.

“If your brother or sister sins against you, rebuke them; and if they repent, forgive them. ⁴ Even if they sin against you seven times in a day and seven times come back to you saying ‘I repent,’ you must forgive them.”

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 has a servant plowing or looking after the sheep. Will he say to the servant when he comes in from the field, ‘Come along now and sit down to eat’?

⁸ Won’t he 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 Will 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.’ ”

The Word of God we’ll consider today is the Gospel from Luke 17. Let’s begin with prayer:

Lord Jesus, give me the strength to do, with ready heart and willing, whatever you command, my calling here fulfilling. That I do what I should, while trusting you to bless the outcome for my good. For you must give success. Amen.

“C’mon, you can do this.” We’ve all heard that phrase or said it I’m sure. As children our parents tell us to do our homework or clean our room or be nice to our siblings... and when we complain and say we’re not able... mom or dad says “C’mon, you can do this.”

Sometimes we are asked to do things that are hard. Things that are not super fun to do. But we have to do them anyways. Some people call this adulting. Jesus calls it being a disciple.

In our sermon text today from Luke 17 Jesus is speaking to his disciples. So everything he says here is meant for you and me too. These are not words spoken to the unbelieving world who “really needs to get their act together”. These are words that God’s people need to hear. And they help us with the proper attitude when it comes to doing hard things for God. Today we’ll consider Jesus’ words and learn how unworthy servants are made worthy to serve.

At first glance these verses might seem a little all over the place. In fact if you read the section headings that most Bibles include for this chapter you’ll see titles like “Sin, faith, duty” or “Various teachings of Jesus”. But really this whole section fits together quite well when you walk through it. Let’s look at how Jesus begins. Luke writes: **Jesus said to his disciples: “Things that cause people to stumble are bound to come, but woe to anyone through whom they come. It would be better for them to be thrown into the sea with a millstone tied around their neck than to cause one of these little ones to stumble. So watch yourselves.**

This is the first of two really hard things Jesus asks his disciples to do. He is basically saying, “don’t lead people into sin.” The term **“little ones”** here is not the same term use in the New Testament for little children. Jesus isn’t just talking about watching how we act in front of kids, although that certainly would be included here. Really, he’s saying you should not lead any of God’s little ones, God’s people, into sin. If you do things that cause a fellow believer to stumble in their faith you are doing serious harm. In fact, if you are going to do things that lead others away from faith in Jesus, it would be better that your physical life end than that you lead them into eternal death.

And before we all nod our heads and agree... recognize, we are all capable of leading others into such sin. And I’m not just talking about the crass sins we might lead others into... like getting your friends or family to drink too much with you, or watch things on TV with you that damage their faith, or gossip with them about others to feel better about yourselves. Yes, such things are of course sins that we might lead others into... but there are other, more subtle things that are easy to fall into also.

Do you bring your kids to church on Sunday but then never share the gospel with them during the week? Talk about a stumbling block to faith! Or do you lead your friends or family to think that what should be most important to them is school or sports or work or recreation? What does that do to others when you lead them to such idols of this life instead of God for validation, joy, peace, or purpose? Does that help them in their walk of faith, or are you putting stumbling blocks in their way?

These are words that wound us. But Jesus isn’t done. He continues: **“If your brother or sister sins against you, rebuke them; and if they repent, forgive them. Even if they sin against you seven times in a day and seven times come back to you saying ‘I repent,’ you must forgive them.”**

This one might be even harder than the last. Can you imagine if someone sinned against you and then asked for forgiveness, and after you gave it... they ended up doing that same thing again later that day? You’d be outraged. In fact when we’re kids, what did we often hear from our parents??? “How many times do I have to tell you...” “We just talked about this!” Right? Now imagine that person does this seven times in a day. Could you forgive them, truly forgive them each and every time? Jesus tells us we have to. And we can’t just say the words, we need to mean it.

I think many of us have trouble forgiving even once. Can you even remember the last time you told a fellow Christian “I forgive you.” We don’t even like to say it very often. We feel weird about it. Like if we say those words we are somehow excusing their bad behavior or saying we are not hurt by it. But that’s not what forgiveness is. Saying “I forgive you” is acknowledging that there was something wrong done that needs forgiveness. Saying “I forgive you” means you were hurt, and maybe still are feeling hurt, but you are going to let go of your right to get even, let go of your right to be angry, let go of that sin that was committed against you... and not just for your own sake. Sometimes people say that forgiveness is about doing something that will make you feel better. That may be true, but for the Christian we are called on to forgive for the sake of the person who wronged us... to make them feel better... and more than that, to make sure they know that there is no sin that stands between us, because no sin stands between us and God for Jesus’ sake.

These are words that wound us. These are hard things. And the disciples see that. Look at their reaction to Jesus’ words. Luke writes: **The apostles said to the Lord, “Increase our faith!”**

This isn't a bad reaction really... the disciples immediately realize they don't have what it takes to live such a life... a life that never leads others to sin... a life that is always ready, willing, and able to forgive those who do sin against us. They need something from outside themselves to be able to do such things. And what is Jesus' response? **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.**

Jesus basically is saying, "The problem is not that you need a bigger faith... the problem is that you need to realize the faith you have is sufficient for this work already." Even a tiny faith, as small as a mustard seed, can do the impossible. Why? Because faith does not rely on its size, but on its object.

For example, in Wisconsin where I grew up the lakes would freeze over every winter and people would go out on them to go ice fishing. I was always a bit nervous to go out on the ice, never quite sure if it would hold up. Others I would fish with were much more confident. In fact I've known people who would drive trucks right out onto the ice in the middle of the lake without a worry in the world. But whether you believe the ice is able to keep you safe or are filled with fear and doubting, it is not the strength of your faith in the ice that saves you in the end... no, it's the strength of the ice.

The same is true with faith. It is the strength of the one we believe in – Jesus – and not the strength of our faith that saves us. And it is Jesus that allows us to live lives of faith that we could never imagine without him. When we see the duty of a disciple and say "These are hard things! Increase our faith!" Jesus says to us, "You've got enough faith because it is faith in me. And I will give you strength to do these things."

But I suppose the thought could come next, but these things are still hard. So, doesn't that mean we should get some credit, some praise, maybe some reward for doing these hard things? And in response to that thought Jesus continues by showing how such thinking is not the right attitude. He concludes this section saying: **"Suppose one of you has a servant plowing or looking after the sheep. Will he say to the servant when he comes in from the field, 'Come along now and sit down to eat'? Won't he rather say, 'Prepare my supper, get yourself ready and wait on me while I eat and drink; after that you may eat and drink'? Will 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.'"**

If we tell Jesus... "It's too hard." He'll say, "C'mon you can do it. Faith in me means strength from me." And if we come to Jesus after we do such things like live godly lives and forgive others when they sin against us... if we come to him and say, "Hey, look what I did!" Should we expect some great reward? A servant doesn't get rewarded for doing his job. It's his job.

For us as Christians we want our attitude to always be: "We are unworthy servants. We've just done what we should do." And if we are really honest, I think we'd have to admit, much of the time we can't even say that. Instead we have to admit, "We are unworthy servants, who have not even done our basic duty to God and neighbor."

These are hard words. Words that wound. But they wound us like all the words in this sermon series in order to bring about a greater healing. Because while we must admit we fail in our lives of faith and forgiveness daily... that we are unworthy servants who rarely do our duty, and when we do it is often done begrudgingly... despite all of this God has a different view of us entirely.

Because while Jesus is right, that we should say “We are just unworthy servants.” God’s view of us in Christ is not of an unworthy servant, but of a worthy, and beloved friend and family member.

Jesus once said, **“Everyone who sins is a slave to sin. Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.” John 8:34-36** We are only unworthy servants. But we have been made worthy by Jesus. Set free by Jesus. And so God doesn’t see us as lowly servants anymore. Jesus told his disciples another time **“I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master’s business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last.” John 15:15-16**

And you know how such a change took place for us. It was through Christ who laid aside his glory, to take upon himself the form of a servant. It was through Christ always doing his duty and never boasting about it. It was through Christ never leading others into sin, and always being willing to forgive. It was through Christ who earned that forgiveness by becoming the unworthy servant, taking our place under God’s wrath on the cross. It was through Christ who rose in triumph and now serves us still as King and Priest – daily watching over us, strengthening us to serve, and interceding for us when we stumble in our walk of faith.

Jesus is the reason we unworthy servants are now made worthy to serve. And Jesus is the reason that God the Father accepts our service, imperfect though it is. Because in Christ, we have our perfection. In Christ we have a perfect and unending source of strength to serve and wisdom to obey. We can say with St. Paul who wrote in Galatians: **“I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” Galatians 2:20**

Yes, in Christ we will always find a Savior unwilling to ask us for anything less than perfectly obedient service... but we will also always find in Christ a Savior eager to assure us that such service was already rendered perfectly by him on our behalf... and so we can serve God freely now and without fear that our service is not enough. Jesus is enough. God bless you as you freely serve, knowing that you’ve been made worthy by Christ. Amen.