

Luke 17:1-10 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.'"

"Slaves' Work"

Upon a first read of this passage from Luke we sort of have to step back and say, "Whoa! There's a lot going on here." It seems to be a bunch of unrelated teachings of Jesus that Luke has thrown together with no central thought holding them together. There's a warning against causing others to sin, a command to keep watch over each other by admonishing and forgiving, a blurb about faith, and a difficult teaching about the appropriate attitude that slaves should have upon completion of what they have been commanded to do.

Disjointed though it may appear, I do think there is an underlying common thread here involving works, faith, and the Kingdom of God. To find this thread we must accept that the difficult teaching by Jesus about slaves' work and their attitude is an allegory in which the characters and actions and so forth represent something else. For example, the slaves in this parable are the disciples. Their master is the Lord. The work which they have been commanded to do is to avoid causing others to sin and to watch over each other by admonishing one another in our sins and forgiving the repentant. Jesus tells this parable because the disciples have commanded him to increase their faith. For them to ask that and for Jesus to do so would be like a servant coming in from a field and the master inviting him to come and recline with him at table and eat which is an obvious analogy to the Kingdom of God. It is more appropriate for the slaves to come in and serve the master while he dines expecting no reward. Moreover, the proper attitude slaves, a disciples should have about their work is to do what they are commanded expecting no reward saying, "We are worthless slaves who have done only what we ought to have done."

So that's everything in a nutshell. It may be a bit confusing for the moment so let's look at the parts. First, let us look briefly at the slaves' work which is commanded of us. Jesus begins in verse one sounding very Yoda-esque in the Greek, "Impossible it is for scandal not to come, but woe to the one through whom it comes." In Romans chapter fourteen the Apostle Paul says this

in a more politically correct way telling us to not give others a reason to judge us, but rather to “make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification” (Rm. 14:19). This is a difficult teaching for these days and times for we have become accustomed to doing whatever we want because “it is now the 21st century and we’re all adults and God’s not going to get us because he loves us and besides its a greater sin for people in the church to judge another than it is for me to do what I know Scripture says I should not do.” We’ve come to believe that the church is supposed to be a loving place not a judging place. Yes, it is supposed to be a loving place but sometimes that love must come in the form of admonishing one another with respect to sin even if means asking someone to leave the fellowship.

Jesus commands us to keep a watch on ourselves and on each other and to admonish the brother or sister who sins. If they repent, we are to forgive them; even if they keep repeating the same sin over and over and yet are repentant we are to forgive. Forgiveness means not only to say I forgive you but also to restore the fellowship that was broken because of the person’s sin. It is not forgiving and forgetting. It is forgiving and moving forward acknowledging that things are now different and we will work together to resolve the differences. Forgiveness is restoration to loving fellowship. Yet, Jesus does acknowledge that it is difficult to grant forgiveness when the offending brother or sister does not repent. Sin in the church cripples the body, cripples the fellowship. It causes false pride, self-righteousness, shame, and hiding from one another rather than striving to deepen friendships. The pain it causes the congregation is why we strive to avoid it and rather make every effort to do what leads to peace and mutual edification.

Moving on, I guess that it was in response to this daunting task that the disciples commanded, not requested, that Jesus increase their faith. They would need strong faith that the Father in his steadfast love and faithfulness would keep all Hell from breaking loose in their midst if they were going to actually deal with the sin in their midst. Jesus responds by saying “If you have faith as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea,’ and it will obey you.” We must put on our decoder rings here again. Jesus has previously taught that the Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed (13:19). It is a small seed but it grows into a big bush that gives home to the birds of the air. So, it is with faith. It starts small and grows and becomes a great source of hospitality. The particular if/then structure of this sentence in the NT Greek language assumes that the “if” part is indeed true and therefore the “then” part will occur. Thus, the disciples already do have faith as a mustard seed, therefore they can command the mulberry tree to be uprooted and planted in the sea. So, have you commanded any mulberry trees to uproot themselves lately?

Once again we must put on the decoder ring, because Jesus is not talking about petty little miracles. The mulberry tree has heart shaped leaves which silk worms love and its fruit produces a blood red juice. I think the leaf of the Mulberry tree makes a good analogy to the destruction that sin brings. It turns one into a worm infested bloody heart. We have faith as a mustard seed.

Though it may be small it grows as the kingdom of God grows into a large bush that is a home. We can command away the sin in our midst and it will obey.

Yet, the point here is that if we want our faith to increase we must not ask Jesus for a holy zap that makes us trust more. We rather are to do the work that he has commanded us to do in dealing with our own and with one another’s sin so that this congregation truly will be a house of loving hospitality where healing from the brokenness of sin really happens. This is World Communion Day and Thanksgiving Sunday here in Canada. Today we gather around a table that the Lord has set before us, a table that we on our own merits have no business eating at. Miraculously, Jesus invites us to come in from the field and from the sheep. Oddly, he does not command us to wait on him while he eats. Rather, he serves us; nourishing us in our weakness and cleansing and healing our wounds. Today we truly do have reason to give our thanks because honestly, we are all unworthy servants who have made only feeble attempts to do what we have been commanded. We do knowingly let sin persist in our lives causing others to sin. We turn our heads when we see our brothers and sisters sin. Sometimes we reach out in compassion which is great, but for the most part we refrain from calling sin what it is...SIN...and thereby we allow one another to suffer needless. Even so, Jesus invites us to this table, his table. We have been given faith as a mustard seed and, praise the Lord, in his grace it will grow – your faith, my our faith, our faith – it will grow because it is the very own faith of Jesus Christ given to us as a seed in the gift of the Holy Spirit. Friends, do not worry that your faith is weak for it will grow. Friends, keep turning from sin and it will leave you. But for now, come...come to this table you bunch of lucky bums because the Lord wants to give us rest from the work and nourish us for the task at hand. Amen.