

“Impossible Faith” (Luke 17:1–10)(9.20.20)

Luke 17:1–10 (NIV84) *Sin, Faith, Duty*

17 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.’”

The word of God for the people of God.

Title: **“Impossible Faith”**

LET US PRAY.

INTRODUCTION:

We have before us the words of Jesus. They read like the book of Proverbs. At first, they do not seem to go together. Is there a connecting thread? There is a warning about sin. There is a commandment about forgiving. There is a hyperbolic proclamation about faith. And then, Jesus tells a short parable about the ploughing servant.

With only a cursory reading, you may be discouraged by this scripture. It took me two days of wrestling with Jesus’ words before I finally decided I could preach them this morning. Then it took a couple more days before the flower opened up and revealed its beauty and sweet aroma.

The issue of faith is the key connector. And in the title, I have given you the human response to Jesus’ teaching for His disciples. We will explore this faith of which Jesus is teaching. It is a supernatural creation, but accessible to all followers of Jesus.

Like today, we often recite together the Nicene Creed and sometimes the Apostle’s Creed. These are statements of belief. They are a summary of Christian beliefs that have been used to teach the basic tenets of our faith. You may be wondering what I mean by faith.

We find one definition in Hebrews 11:1 (NIV84): Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. It is more than belief; it is trusting in those things you believe. Faith is trusting in the One in whom we believe. For Christians, it is a way of living. Our beliefs, as we live them out, demonstrate a trust in God and God’s promises. Our faith is a source of strength.

So let us unpack this understanding as it relates to today’s teaching by Jesus.

BODY:

Jesus starts by addressing the reality of sin in human existence. Surprisingly, the different English translations express this in a variety of ways: things that cause people to sin; temptations to sin; stumbling blocks; occasions for stumbling; offenses will come. They are bound to come; sure to come; inevitable; impossible for them not to come.

If there are people, they will be tempted, and they will sin. Then the English translations universally announce “woe” to that person **through whom** sin opportunities are advanced. Little ones may refer to newer believers but surely means anyone that is vulnerable.

It is evident to me that we are to protect the vulnerable from those things that encourage sin. Our media and entertainment are sources used by Satan to lead people astray. Smart phone technology and

ever-present screens barrage our little ones with unhealthy images and behaviors. Peer pressure is powerful and it is hard for someone to stand against the crowd. If everyone else is doing it, how can it be wrong?

This woe that Jesus pronounces is serious. He doesn't just say they will be thrown into the sea. He doesn't just say they will be drowned. They will have a large and very heavy stone hung around their neck and cast into the sea. They will be dragged down into the abyss. They will be helpless and escape will be impossible.

How about if we fail to equip the little ones to deal with the temptations of sin? By not teaching and mentoring young believers, we are setting them up for failure. We must take seriously our obligation to nurture new Christians in their faith walk.

So, watch yourselves; pay attention; be on your guard; take heed of yourselves. This is a serious issue. In fact, sin is a much more serious issue than we acknowledge. The preacher doesn't want to offend. The Sunday school teacher doesn't want to be negative.

What we must confront head-on is the fact that sin is the reason that Jesus came to walk this planet as a human being. Sin is why Jesus died for us. He was severely beaten. Then he was nailed to that Calvary cross. Because of sin, Jesus took God the Father's wrath for all humanity, to pay the penalty. And sin is why this world is so messed up.

Without a full appreciation for the seriousness of sin, we cannot appreciate what Jesus did for us. We cannot appreciate the Father that so loved the world that he sent His only begotten Son to be the perfect Lamb sacrificed on our behalf. Without that understanding, we cannot love our God as we should.

I see in social media and even in churches a misrepresentation of Jesus. It is a shallow understanding. Or, their Jesus is one dimensional. Maybe they see him as only a great teacher. Maybe they see him as fully human but not fully divine; or vice versa. Maybe they see Jesus as something to add to their lives. There is a song called "Plastic Jesus." There is a wide variety in the lyrics and new verses get added.

I don't care if it rains or freezes,
As long as I got my plastic Jesus
Sittin' on the dashboard of my car.

Comes in colors pink and pleasant,
Glows in the dark cause he's iridescent
Take him with you when you travel far.

The lyrics are consistently irreverent and I have just given you a fairly innocuous sample. But do not be dismissive of this problem, thinking it applies only to agnostics and atheists.

In 2015, Barna research showed that only about half of young adults in America believe that Jesus is God. So, it shouldn't be a surprise that more than half believe Jesus committed sin. Because these are accelerating trends, the data for today has to reflect a further deterioration of belief in the Christian tenets of faith. We must do a better job teaching our children who Jesus is and why he came!

Because sin is a reality of life in this world, we must know how to deal with sin. It is not some abstraction or something for the other guy; we all regularly deal with sin against us and our own sin against God and people. Even from fellow followers of Jesus, we will experience the pain of sin. Jesus makes that clear by calling the offender your brother or another disciple.

What is the proper response? We must confront them in love. Your purpose is NOT to punish them for their offense, you leave that for God. Your purpose is make them aware of their sin, the injury they have caused. Your motivation is actually other focused and comes from love.

If they repent, which is the desired result and why you rebuked them, forgive them. In the love chapter, Paul tells us that love keeps no record of wrongs. In fact, Jesus says, we must, we must forgive them.

There is no denying that dealing with those that sin against us is challenging. Often times, there is real pain or discomfort involved. The closer we are to the people the harder it can be. What if that person sins against us more than once? What if it happens on the same day? What if it happens seven times in the same day? If they repent, we MUST forgive them.

And that is when the disciples interrupt Jesus. Wait! What? How can we do that Jesus? We cannot do it under our own power. It is impossible. We need more faith. Their request is often characterized as a prayer: "increase our faith." They had a certain level of faith, but what Jesus is requiring overwhelms them.

Before I move on to Jesus' response, there is a great truth of a great promise inherent in this teaching. You and I can take great comfort in this teaching on two different levels. First, we are part of a very special community. As Jesus followers, we are a forgiving people, which means others will forgive us too! Second, and of eternal significance, if true repentance on our part begets forgiveness on the human level, how much more so on the divine level? Certainly, Jesus would not hold us to a higher standard than that which our perfectly loving heavenly Father upholds.

We can be assured forgiveness.

Psalm 103:11–12 (NIV84) ¹¹For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him; ¹² as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us. Micah 7:19 (NIV84) You [God] will again have compassion on us; you will tread our sins underfoot and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea.

And a verse I often quote: 1 John 1:9 (NIV84) If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

Jesus replies to the apostle's request for more faith, "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." How is that kind of faith possible? The mustard seed is tiny and they have already said they had faith. Uprooting the tree seems impossible. Getting this uprooted tree to the sea seems impossible. But more than that, this tree is to be planted not just placed in the sea.

How can this be so? This tree is taken from one realm into another realm. Our faith operates in another realm, on another level, and yet it affects this realm in which we live. The thing about a tiny mustard seed is it grows into a huge plant, some even call it a tree, which can reach ten feet in height.

On one level, Jesus is saying that faith is powerful. Faith works outside natural limits. On another level, Jesus is saying our faith is living. Because it is alive, faith can increase, which is a direct answer to their prayer for more faith. What can be done to nurture and contribute to the growing of a lively faith?

This brings us to the parable of the ploughing servant. On the surface, from our 2020 perspective, this parable portrays a master who is pretty heartless. The servant has been working all day out in the fields. When he comes inside, he is to get cleaned up and then proceed with his domestic chores. When all that is done, then the servant may eat and drink. The master never even thanks the servant.

Well, on a modern and strictly human level, this offends our sensibilities. First, some translations use the word slave for servant, which more closely represents the situation. A master owns the slave. A master has complete authority over the slave. There are no expectations of the slave upon the master, even for appreciation after a long, hard, faithful day's work.

In a sermon titled "God's Slaves," Alexander Maclaren addresses this issue. "It is a foul and wicked relation when existing between men, and it has been full of cruelty and atrocities. But Jesus Christ lays His hand upon it, and says, 'That is the relation between men and God; that is the relation between men and Me.'"

"The Christian thought is the higher one, 'Thou hast beset me behind and before, and laid Thine hand upon me,' and wherever I am I am under obligation to serve Thee, and no past record of work absolves me from the work of the present. From the cradle to the grave I walk beneath an all-encompassing,

overarching firmament of duty. As long as we draw breath we are bound to the service of Him whose slaves we are, and whose service is perfect freedom.”

There is a quote attributed to a musician named Marc Anthony: “If you do what you love, you’ll never work a day in your life.” One of the reasons that I have trouble taking vacation time is because I love what I do. I love teaching and preaching the things of God.

A month or so ago, on a Sunday evening, my cell phone rang. I didn’t recognize the number but I had a feeling I should answer it. I was surprised to hear my doctor, Dr. Grace, greet me. She was calling to discuss my recent laboratory results from some bloodwork. At the end of the call, I expressed surprise that she was calling me on a Sunday night. She told me that she works every day. There was no resentment and no regret, just a statement of fact. Dr. Grace truly cares for her patients.

Jesus says in John 14:15 (NIV84) “If you love me, you will obey what I command.”

And Paul tells us in Ephesians 6:6 (NIV84), but like slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart.

Psalms 40:8 (NIV84) I desire to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart.”

My friends, we cannot earn our way to heaven. We are not trying to earn our heavenly wages. Rather we are living as faithful servants to the Master who loves us more than we can fathom. To our Master, we owe our very lives. We are God’s wholly, completely.

Satan whispers in our ear: you deserve this; you deserve that; at least you should be thanked. We have a natural tendency to think more highly of ourselves than we should. When others don’t respond to our “goodness” in the way we think they should, we begin to resent them and the duty that we felt compelling us.

So, Jesus is telling the apostles that their faith will increase as they serve the Master. In contrast to a sense of entitlement, there is true humility. This humility is not having a low opinion of yourself. Instead, it is simply not thinking of yourself at all. Because of our love for the Lord Jesus, because of our gratitude, we serve our Master with a sincere heart.

CONCLUSION:

In the natural, to work all day out in the fields, then come into the house and work another half-day without expecting something in return would be impossible. But Jesus told a doubting father that “all things are possible for him who believes.” And, we are people of faith. Preacher Marvin Vincent said, “The things which master the slave are mastered by the friend.”

The other day, Rev. Thomas Lambrecht, an UMC ordained elder, and vice president of the Good News organization, sent out an email. In this email he decries “the steady erosion of the Christian worldview from American society over the past 30 years. He quotes a survey that found that only 51 percent of Americans believe the Christian definition of God.”

“Even as many as 20-30 percent of those claiming to be Christians are either not sure whether God exists or have a non-Christian view of God.”

“Combining a number of questions about God, only ten percent of the American public have a robustly Christian view of God. They believe he is all-powerful, all-knowing, perfect, the just creator of the universe, that he still rules it today, that he loves the person unconditionally, that he has a reason for everything that happens in a person's life, and that he is involved in the person's life.”

Doing the math, that means 90% of Americans do not share that faith.

My prayer for our nation, is for a mighty movement of the Holy Spirit to create repentant hearts. May they be moved to cry out, Lord Jesus increase our faith. My prayer is not just for non-believers, but for even those who claim Christ with their mouths, but whose daily walk denies Him.

Yes, sin is a reality in our fallen world. Repentance is crucial in our relationships with people and God. Forgiveness is required by us as Jesus commands it. Praise be to God that this same forgiveness is offered to us by our heavenly Father because of the sacrificial work of His Son and our Savior, the Lord Jesus.

We need to be equipped with the supernatural power of faith. It is through grace, the gift of God. A life lived in this impossible faith operates in another realm. God's grace works in and through our service to Him, in us, in those we serve, and in the world at large. We serve not because of duty, but because of delight in the Lord whom we love.

Oh for the day, we hear those words, "well done, good and faithful servant."

Amen and amen. Let us pray.