

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost – October 2, 2016
Good Shepherd Ev. Lutheran Church

Pastor Charles Heup

Luke 17:1-10

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.'** "

Fellow Servants of our Lord,

Motivational speakers often like to encourage people by telling them that hard work leads to great rewards. For instance Vince Lombardi Jr. is quoted as saying: **"The dictionary is the only place that success comes before work. Work is the key to success, and hard work can help you accomplish anything."**

Although the Bible places a "high value" on work, it stops short of teaching that hard work can help you accomplish anything. In our text, Jesus teaches his followers to do some "hard things." But, he also teaches his followers to put their own works into a proper perspective when he says: **"When you have done everything you were told to do, should say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.'** "

Theme: We are Unworthy Servants

1. Even when we are careful not to cause others to sin
2. Even when we forgive our brothers seven times
3. Even when we do all God has told us

Let's begin by considering the "hard things" that Jesus commands us to do as his followers. **"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.**

Because human beings are sinful, it's impossible that offences which cause people to sin will not happen. What a person does or says might disturb the faith of someone else or lead him or her to sin. The bad example of some might cause others to become ensnared or trapped in unbelief or sin. This is something that is hard to avoid because it may even happen without our thinking or knowledge. Jesus doesn't want us to take a careless attitude toward the things we do our say. By going along with the crowd we may give the impression that sin doesn't matter. That could cause someone to ignore their own sins rather than to repent of them. That would lead to harmful consequences. Because so much is at stake, Jesus warns: **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.**

Don't do anything which causes others to sin or to reject Christ and his word. Jesus in particular urges us to be careful not to offend "these little ones." Children are easily impressed by what they see adults doing. They will often pick up on our actions and attitudes and begin to mimic them in their own lives without even knowing what they are really doing or saying. An child might hear his uncle misuse the Lord's name. The next day while at play, the child might do the very same thing because he wants to be grown up just like his uncle. The bad example of his uncle causes him to sin.

It's not just children who can be led astray. It can happen to any believer, especially those who might be new to the faith and are "child-like" in that regard. Jesus wants us to be very careful not to give anyone a reason to sin. That's hard to do!

It's also hard to rebuke sinners and forgive them. **"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."**

How often haven't you heard someone excuse his or her lack of a response to someone's sin by saying, "It's not up to me to judge." That response shows just how hard it is to rebuke or point out sin. It also shows a misunderstanding of the responsibility that we have been given for the spiritual welfare of others. Pointing our sin isn't judging – it's telling a person what God says so they can see the error of their ways and turn away from them seeking the Lord's forgiveness. We are seeking to spare them the consequences of God's punishment. It's hard to do this but's the loving thing to do.

When our rebuke is taken to heart then Jesus asks us to do another hard thing – to forgive. To forgive as he forgave! And to forgive as often as the repentant sinner seeks our forgiveness – even seven times in one day! That's hard!

Perhaps however it becomes a bit easier for us to do this when we first of all realize the value of God's forgiveness. When we pause as we do each Sunday morning (and hopefully throughout the week) to confess our sins to the Lord seeking his mercy and forgiveness we will grow in our appreciation for the gift of forgiveness and we will be willing to extend that gift to others.

When we pause to confess our sins, we are also reminding ourselves of the seriousness of sin – sin separates us from our God and his blessings. Love for our neighbor and concern for their spiritual welfare will led us to both rebuke and to forgive sin even though it's not the easy thing to do.

Jesus disciples understood the difficulty of doing what Jesus had told them to do. Their response shows that they also understood their need for the Lord's help to serve him in this way. **The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!"**

Jesus had pointed out two things he wanted his disciples to do: 1) to watch their lives carefully so that they would not lead others to sin and 2) to always be ready to forgive each other's sins. It's interesting to note that the Apostles didn't throw up their hands and say, "Lord who can do this? It's impossible!" On this occasion, they looked to the Lord and confessed the weakness of their faith. **The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!"**

The Apostle Paul reflected Christ's words when he wrote: **"You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love."** (Galatians 5:13 NIV) As we serve each other we want to be careful not to lead anyone into sin. It is our desire as Christians to let our lights shine before men so that they will see our deeds and glorify our Father in heaven.

(Cf. Matthew 5:16) That's hard to do. So together with the Apostles we might say to the Lord, "Increase our faith."

Jesus' response to this request is interesting. Jesus doesn't want us to use a "weak faith" as an excuse for neglecting his commands. Jesus wanted them to put their faith into action by looking to the Lord, listening to words (his commands, promises and teachings) and then to obey, trust and believe him. Rather than being overly concerned about the "size" of our faith, we should simply act in faith.

That's why Jesus responded to the Apostles request by saying: **"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."**

With these words Jesus makes a heroic statement. He's not telling us to transplant trees by simply speaking to them. Rather he is emphasizing that when we act in keeping with his commands great things can be done. If we have any faith at all, we can cause things to happen that seem impossible for us to do.

The Apostle Peter gives us a good example to follow. Once, after spending the night in a futile attempt to net any fish – the Lord Jesus gave Peter and his companions the command to cast their nets on the right side of the boat and you will find some. At this time Peter's faith may not have been particularly strong. After all this event took place after Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection when the disciples were in need of growing in their faith and understanding of all that had taken place. If I were Peter I think I could have come up with a number of excuses. Peter simply did what the Lord told him and the Lord blessed his efforts with a miraculous catch of fish (153 large fish but even with so many the net was not torn.) (Cf. John 21:4ff.)

Now let's think again about the hard things Jesus has asked us to do in this text. Trusting in our Lord we will guard against giving offence and we will forgive those who sin against us numerous times. Maybe not perfectly and not always but -- we will actually be able to do some pretty hard things! We will do them out of love for Jesus and as a fruit of faith in him.

Jesus has one more lesson for us to learn. He wants us to put our "hard accomplishments" into the proper perspective. So he reminds us that we are his servants with the final words of this text.

"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 details of Jesus' parable are quite simple. It is the servants role to serve the master. It is our role to serve our Lord. We are the servants. He is the loving Master. He is the one who created us. He is the one who rescued us from our slavery to sin and the devil. He redeemed us to be his own – to live under him in his kingdom and to serve him in everlasting innocence and righteousness. That is what fills us with the desire to respond to his teachings in faith.

Even if we would do everything that God asks of us, we could never look to God and say, "Look at all of my hard work. Surely. I've accomplished great things in your eyes. I deserve to be rewarded for my efforts." If we were talk that way to God he would have to remind us, "You have only done your duty. That's why I created and redeemed you. I owe you nothing other than what I have already done for you."

Jesus' response to his disciples wasn't just a lecture. It really was the perfect answer to their request for a stronger faith. He used his answer to strengthen their faith. As we've considered his answer Jesus has strengthened our faith by reminding us of our need for his blessings. When we admit that God owes us nothing and that we really only deserve his punishment for our failures and sins, God's love in rescuing us and preparing heaven for us will be recognized for the undeserved gift of grace that it is!

When we look away from ourselves and look to Christ we are looking at blessings which are sure and reliable. When I say, "Christ Jesus come into the world to save sinners (cf. 1 Timothy 1:15) including me!" my faith is strengthened.

With faith in our Savior who saved us, we are happy to watch our lives so that we do not lead others to sin. We forgive those who sin against us. We gladly take all of the Lord's commands to heart and seek to follow them. And, when we do these hard things – we humbly confess, we are unworthy servants. We also confidently confess that we belong to Christ for time and for eternity! We joyfully live for him with the confidence that one day we will live with him. That's faith in action!

Lord, give us such a faith as this,
And then, what'er may come,
We'll taste e'en now the hallow bliss
Of our eternal home.

Amen.