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St. John's Lutheran Church of Burlington
5 October 2025

Sermon on Luke 17:1-10

Worship Theme:

INCREASED FAITH INCREASES DUTY

As our faith grows, there are obvious benefits: the comfort of knowing you are a redeemed and loved child of God, the peace of knowing your eternity is secure. However, increased faith also increases duty. There are ever more opportunities for service. This week, Jesus has sharp words for those who want the benefits of being Christian but would shirk those responsibilities. He helps us see that while increased faith increases duty, increased duty increases delight. Believers know we serve the One who came to serve us first. What a privilege!

Sermon Theme: “Lord, Increase Our Faith!”

1. Challenges to Our Life of Faith
2. Delight in the Duty of Faith

It doesn't really sound all that great, does it. Why did they want this?? After spending a while teaching people how to have a proper perspective on wealth and money, Jesus continued by teaching his disciples what the life of faith looks like. And it honestly sounds kinda tough. Not only does Jesus explain what a life of faith will be like at its foundation, but then the bigger and stronger our faith gets, the more challenging life will likely be, and more will be asked and expected of us.

As he says these things, it's important to note that Jesus is speaking to people who already have faith in him. So none of the things he is talking about are things people should do to “make a decision to believe in him” or to “dedicate their lives to him,” because that's not how faith in Jesus works. Faith is not something people decide to have, nor is it something we have the power to create. God alone has that power and ability, therefore God alone decides who has it. But as people to whom God has already given this priceless and amazing gift, now he asks us to wrestle with what living a life of faith truly means.

Jesus begins with a warning – “*Things that cause people to stumble are bound to come, but woe to anyone through whom they come.*” The life of faith is not an easy one. Believing in Jesus seems like it's becoming less popular all the time, and therefore, it has become very difficult to do. When it seems like everyone in the world around us agrees on what is good or bad and what people should and should not do, it's hard to be different and to instead remain faithful to what GOD says when his Word does not agree with the world's decision.

However, Jesus says it's absolutely essential that we do. We must hold on to him and his Word, no matter what. We never want to experience what will happen to the people who lead others away from God's truth. Jesus says a horrible death by drowning would be a far better alternative than what God will do to those who deliberately cause his people to stumble in their life of faith. So Jesus makes this warning very personal. *Watch YOURSELVES.* See to it that YOU do not do this!

Then Jesus takes us to the topic of forgiveness. This should be easy enough to hear and understand, right? It isn't exactly hard or complicated: If someone sins against you, gently correct them; if they confess their sin to you, joyfully forgive them. How many times? Jesus says, *"If they sin against you seven times and seven times come back to you saying 'I repent,' you must forgive them."* The number seven isn't the important part here. The important part is that the numbers are the same. However many times they come, that's how many times you forgive them.

Then Jesus explains that being a follower of him means being a servant. The point of having faith isn't to make us better, more important, or more powerful and influential than anyone else. Instead of giving us greater things in this world, a life of faith actually does the opposite. It puts others first and makes others more important. It serves God by willingly and joyfully serving the people around us. And when we have done everything God has asked, don't expect a special reward. We simply did what we were supposed to do.

Many times in Scripture, we see Jesus' disciples struggle to understand his words, wondering how many times Jesus has to say something before it sinks into their thick heads! But not today. Today, they understand exactly what Jesus is saying: If you have faith in Jesus, there will be challenges in your life, of which one of the biggest is being expected to freely forgive everyone who sins against you and repents of their sin. How do we know the disciples got it? Because they quickly admitted how hard this is to do! "Jesus, I don't know if I can do that! This sounds like a hard price to pay for following you. You're really asking us to do this for the rest of our lives?! If so, we need some help. **Lord, increase our faith!!**"

...But why? If all faith does is give us problems, ask difficult things of us, and tell us to perform our duty just because that's what we're expected to do, then why would we want faith at all? And why ask Jesus for even more of it?!

Here's why: because for as many things as faith asks FROM us, it gives infinitely more things TO us. Something that's always important for pastors to do when preparing and writing sermons is to study a portion of God's Word to find what the Law is (that is, which parts show our sin and tell us what we should do or should not do) and find what the Gospel is (that is, which parts show our Savior Jesus and everything he has done for us – the good news!). It's not just important for pastors to do this while preparing sermons, though. This is for all Christians to do it every time we read God's Word. That's how we learn what God wants us to hear, know, believe, and do in whatever part we just read!

So what about Luke 17? It's easy to see the "dos" and "don'ts", as well as all the places we can go wrong in our life of faith. But where is the good news?

It's certainly there. Sometimes the greatest gospel is simply remembering who is speaking these words to us. It's Jesus! God-in-the-flesh, the Savior of the world, who came to earth to do everything God's Law demanded and to willingly sacrifice his own life to save the lives of sinners like us. It is impossible for people to save ourselves, God lovingly chose to step in and save us himself. That same Savior God is the one who says everything in our reading today. That means God kept his promise and THE SAVIOR CAME – that's very, very good news!!

And this Savior is speaking to *his disciples*. That means Jesus has followers, people who believe in him. And because we know faith is not something we can ever choose to have, that means God himself gave it to these followers, which also means God is actively at work in his world giving people exactly what they need in order to be saved from sin forever. And because there are still believers today – YOU being here is proof of that! – it means God the Holy Spirit is still doing that same wonderful work of planting faith in the hearts of people to save us.

And if that's all we got today, we would have plenty of good news; but there's more. Jesus warned the believers that difficult things would happen to them in this world, which means God already knows about them. God knows they will happen, and God already has a plan to make them work out in the end for our eternal good. Believers don't have to be afraid! We often get caught in the fear of "what if my faith isn't strong enough or what if I can't handle this situation??" But that's the wrong question. Our faith isn't strong because of US; it's strong because of GOD – the object and focus of our faith! Our faith is strong because our God is strong. So the question isn't "can we handle this;" the question is, "Can God handle this?" And the answer to that is always "YES, of course he can!"

Jesus knows how difficult it can be for us to forgive each other. Sometimes we're still mad at the person and want them to suffer more for what they did to us, so we don't forgive. But thankfully we are not the final authority when it comes to forgiveness; God is. What does that mean? It means we can forgive someone every time they come to us by remembering this is exactly what God does every time we come to him: he forgives – freely, fully, without condition, and without exception, all for the sake of Jesus. Faith which confidently clings to the forgiveness we have in Christ is also willingly grants forgiveness to others.

Many people struggle with humbling ourselves and willingly serving others. To some extent, we all would rather be served than go around serving others. We don't like the thought of lowly service. But the service Jesus speaks about here is a most amazing and gracious gift. Because the One we serve by faith is the Creator of all things, God Almighty, Lord of Heaven and Earth, and he served us first!

There is no higher or greater master than him, nor is there a higher or greater work than that which is done in service to God. And that includes much more than just the things we do at church or telling other people about Jesus. Obviously those things are wonderful and important, but it's more too. In 2 Thessalonians 1, Paul reminds us that anything we do in service to others – "*every deed prompted by faith*" – can be done *so that the name of the Lord Jesus may be glorified.* [v.11-12] By faith, God's people don't see any service we do for others as a burden, but rather as a blessing, a wonderful opportunity to let the light of Jesus shine in our lives as we serve him and them at the same time. The writers of Psalm 84 said it well when they wrote, "*I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of the wicked.*" Serving the Lord God and his Kingdom of Grace is the greatest privilege we can have in this world, because it means he has called us to be his own.

So if faith does all those things and finds delight in them, then the prayer of the disciples makes a lot more sense and even becomes a prayer we are eager to echo: “**Lord, increase our faith!**” Did you notice how Jesus responded to that request? It sounds a bit strange: *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.* If we all went outside and told one of the big trees around our church to get up and go plant itself in the middle of Lake Michigan, AND IT WENT, would you be impressed? Dumb question – OF COUSE WE WOULD! That would be INSANE! No doubt the disciples felt the same way.

But do you also see Jesus’ point? If you think it would be impressive for a tree to plant itself in the middle of a lake just because you and your faith told it to, are you also impressed by the bigger and far more important things faith can do? Your faith in Jesus is the way forgiveness and eternal life come to you from God. Your faith in Jesus shows itself in your life and could be the reason someone asks to hear and learn more about the God you know and serve. Your faith sustains you through your hardest and most difficult days. Your faith moves you to serve others in love, just like Jesus, and to tell as many people as possible all about the perfect love this Savior has for them. Your faith can do way better things than move trees – it can share with people the message of the grace, mercy, peace, and forgiveness God has for them in Jesus. And that just might change their entire eternity.

That’s what makes the duty of faith so delightful. Faith rejoices in what God gives us to do because it means God has something he wants done, this is the place he wants it to happen, and we are the people he has chosen to do it! That’s incredible! Our faith has already changed our eternity, and now as we serve God and the people around us, we get to be the messengers he uses to change their eternity too. It doesn’t matter if there are challenges and struggles along the way; they can’t harm us forever. The forgiveness of God fills our lives, the love of God motivates us to love others the same way, and our faith prompts us to do whatever Jesus desires – not because we earn a big prize by doing so, but because the biggest prize is already ours, and our joyful service to him is a lifetime of thankfulness and praise for the eternal life he already won for us. We delight to do whatever duty of faith God graciously gives us *so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified.* Therefore we humbly yet boldly pray: **Lord, increase our faith!** Amen!

And the peace of God which goes beyond all understanding will guard and keep our hearts and our minds through faith in Christ Jesus. Amen.