

Faith or Faithfulness?

Luke 17:1-10 HCSB He said to His disciples, "Offenses will certainly come, but woe to the one they come through! (2) It would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck and he were thrown into the sea than for him to cause one of these little ones to stumble. (3) Be on your guard. If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him. (4) And if he sins against you seven times in a day, and comes back to you seven times, saying, 'I repent,' you must forgive him." (5) The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith." (6) "If you have faith the size of a mustard seed," the Lord said, "you can say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it will obey you. (7) "Which one of you having a slave plowing or tending sheep, will say to him when he comes in from the field, 'Come at once and sit down to eat'? (8) Instead, will he not tell him, 'Prepare something for me to eat, get ready, and serve me while I eat and drink; later you can eat and drink'? (9) Does he thank that slave because he did what was commanded? (10) In the same way, when you have done all that you were commanded, you should say, 'We are good-for-nothing slaves; we've only done our duty.'"

Introduction

I'd like to start today by considering the analogy of a gas tank. A gas tank is simply a container that holds the gas needed by your car. You fill it up at the gas station and then slowly the level goes down as the gas is used. When it gets close to being empty, you cross your fingers - hope that gas has gone down that particular day, and then fill the tank back up again.

We sometimes get the idea that our relationship with God is like a gas tank. This is true to some extent because we all have times when we feel spiritually "low." We also have times when, after an inspiring worship service, we feel encouraged, as if our tank has been filled back up.

But such an analogy can be dangerous. Faith is not like a gas tank that constantly needs topping up. And church is not a gas station that merely exists to service your Christianity.

The Mistake

The original disciples made a similar mistake in their thinking. Even though they didn't have gas tanks back then, they thought it was possible and necessary to top up their faith tank. Our passage for today is Luke 17:1-10. But let's jump for a moment to verse 5:

- **Luke 17:5 HCSB** The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith."

The disciples were a lot like us. They felt that if they could have more faith, they could be better disciples. We think like this too. We often look at our life and we are not pleased at what we see. We get this sense that we could be doing better. So, we say to ourselves, "If only I had more faith. Then I could be a better disciple." And we say to God the same thing the disciples said - Increase my faith!

Before we look at Christ's response, let's go back and get the background of this passage. When I first read these verses (1-10), they seemed to me to be quite disconnected. They seemed to be a hodge-podge of various instructions thrown together. This may in fact be the case. Luke could have pieced these verses together from various sayings of Jesus. Or perhaps Jesus did say these all at once. It doesn't matter. The fact is that Holy Spirit inspired Luke to record them here and to record them in this order. And therefore there must be meaning to the order.

The Motive - Accountability

Previously in Luke's account, Jesus had given the parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man. That parable teaches us, among other things, that we need to have a sincere compassion for all people. Now, in verse 1 of chapter 17, Jesus continues to talk about the great responsibility we have as disciples:

- **Luke 17:1-2 HCSB** He said to His disciples, "Offenses will certainly come, but woe to the one they come through! (2) It would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck and he were thrown into the sea than for him to cause one of these little ones to stumble.

Christ is warning us about the seriousness of sin. We are responsible for our actions and our words. It is a very serious thing to cause someone else to stumble. Notice what he says next:

- **Luke 17:3 HCSB** Be on your guard. If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him.

So often we read verses like 1 and 2 and think, "Yeah. God's gonna get people who cause other to stumble" but we don't stop to think whether we ourselves are guilty of doing it. We all need to watch ourselves in that regard. I don't want to be the one that causes others to stumble. I don't want to be in the way of causing God's kingdom to increase. Let's continue:

The Method – Living Gratitude

- **Luke 17:3-4 HCSB** Be on your guard. If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him. (4) And if he sins against you seven times in a day, and comes back to you seven times, saying, 'I repent,' you must forgive him."

This is a slightly different topic. Here Jesus reminds us of two things:

1. We need to be accountable to each other.
2. We need to be forgiving

We will be speaking a lot about the importance of showing grace and mercy to others. Grace and Mercy are the hallmarks of Christianity.

Grace = giving something that is not deserved

Mercy = NOT giving something that IS deserved

So we see that Jesus has been giving some pretty heavy teaching here. First about how we need to be careful not to be a stumbling block and then about the importance of forgiveness.

- **Matthew 18:21-35 HCSB** Then Peter came to Him and said, "Lord, how many times could my brother sin against me and I forgive him? As many as seven times?" (22) "I tell you, not as many as seven," Jesus said to him, "but 70 times seven. (23) For this reason, the kingdom of heaven can be compared to a king who wanted to settle accounts with his slaves. (24) When he began to settle accounts, one who owed 10,000 talents was brought before him. (25) Since he had no way to pay it back, his master commanded that he, his wife, his children, and everything he had be sold to pay the debt. (26) "At this, the slave fell facedown before him and said, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay you everything!' (27) Then the master of that

slave had compassion, released him, and forgave him the loan. (28) "But that slave went out and found one of his fellow slaves who owed him 100 denarii. He grabbed him, started choking him, and said, 'Pay what you owe!' (29) "At this, his fellow slave fell down and began begging him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.' (30) But he wasn't willing. On the contrary, he went and threw him into prison until he could pay what was owed. (31) When the other slaves saw what had taken place, they were deeply distressed and went and reported to their master everything that had happened. (32) "Then, after he had summoned him, his master said to him, 'You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you begged me. (33) Shouldn't you also have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?' (34) And his master got angry and handed him over to the jailers until he could pay everything that was owed. (35) So My heavenly Father will also do to you if each of you does not forgive his brother from his heart."

The Message – Keep doing it

And now it's as if the disciples feel the weight of all of this on their shoulders and in verse 5:

- **Luke 17:5 HCSB** The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith."

It's as if they are saying, "We're not able to do all of this. You didn't give us enough faith to cover it. Please, Jesus, give us more otherwise we will fail! Fill up our faith tanks!"

- **Luke 17:6 HCSB** "If you have faith the size of a mustard seed," the Lord said, "you can say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it will obey you."

When you think about, I don't think this was the answer the disciples were looking for. We might have expected Jesus to pray for them and to ask God to grant them more faith. But Jesus answers almost in a sarcastic way.

If we look at the Greek verb here, the sense of the original language is that the disciples did have faith at least as small as a mustard seed - a mustard seed being the smallest of all seeds. A better paraphrase might be, "You do have faith. And even if it is small, you can still do great things!" In other words, "You already have faith you silly disciples! You just aren't using it!"

The disciples were asking for the wrong thing. They didn't need to increase their faith - they needed to increase their faithfulness. There is a big difference.

Faith is a gift from God. He gives us the amount of faith that we need and it never runs out. To ask God to increase our faith is kind of an insult.

Faithfulness, on the other hand, is our response to our faith. It's what we do with our faith. And that is up to us. Faithfulness is defined as being loyal and obedient to the person we put our trust in. We put our faith in Jesus. We also have to be faithful to him.

When we accept Jesus as Savior, we put our faith in him.

When we accept Jesus as Lord, we put our faithfulness in him.

Jesus needs to be both our Savior and Lord. It's not enough to say, "Thanks Jesus for dying for me. See ya later." When we accept salvation, we die that day. We are no longer who we were before. At baptism, we are resurrected as new person and we no longer live for ourselves - we live for Jesus Christ. As believers, we must give our entire life (every part of it!) over to God. We have to say, "God. Here I am. Use me as you wish."

And when we do that, we have to be willing to be faithful. When God says, "Okay. Here's what I want you to do" we have to be faithful to do it. It's not a matter of faith, it's a matter of faithfulness.

As humans, we like to use excuses. We say things like, "I'm not ready yet. I'm not prepared enough. I need to learn more. I need God to give me more faith." If you are a Christian, you are ready to do whatever it is God wants you to do. He's God. He knows you. If you weren't ready, he wouldn't have asked you. If you are a Christian, you have the Holy Spirit. You have the gift of faith. All you need to do is be faithful. Show your faith by stepping out and relying on His strength - not your own. That's faithfulness.

Jesus leave us with a short parable to help put things in the right perspective.

- **Luke 17:7-10 HCSB** "Which one of you having a slave plowing or tending sheep, will say to him when he comes in from the field, 'Come at once and sit down to eat'? (8) Instead, will he not tell him, 'Prepare something for me to eat, get ready, and serve me while I eat and drink; later you can eat and drink'? (9) Does he thank that slave because he did what was commanded? (10) In the same way, when you have done all that you were commanded, you should say, 'We are good-for-nothing slaves; we've only done our duty.'"

When we are faithful to follow God, we aren't given a medal. When we do good works for God, it doesn't help pay for our salvation. No, faithfulness is merely part of our job description. It's expected. A servant is expected to serve. A Christian is a servant and therefore a Christian is expected to serve, to be faithful.

When we get the feeling that something is not quite right in our walk with God, it's not that we lack faith. It's that we lack faithfulness. If our spiritual tank is running low, we can't come to church and say, "Fill me up." We can't blame the worship team. We can't blame the pastor. The Holy Spirit dwells within us and therefore God can work best from within our own hearts - if we let him.

Have you ever noticed that people who are the most spiritual mature are the people that are being faithful to God. They are the people that are doing what it is that God wants them to be doing. They are living their life for Him, not for themselves. They aren't concerned about their own tanks. They usually concerned about other people's tanks. They know God will take care of their own.

Conclusion

That's the kind of perspective that I yearn for in my own life. That's the kind of perspective that I yearn for in this congregation. I want this to be a place where we are so busy being faithful to God that we wouldn't have any doubts as to the state of our own faith tanks. We'd know they were full because we'd be constantly using them. It's only when we start using our faith that we realize that faith never going to run out! Until then we just hoard it to ourselves worried that we're going to lose it. So my question to you today is, should you be seeking faith? Are you unsaved and in need of the saving faith that only God can provide? Or should you be practicing faithfulness? If you are a Christian, if you have placed your faith in Christ, then your well spring of faith will never dry. You just need to get busy dipping into it and sharing it with others.