

## “Increase Our Faith!”

Luke 17:5-10

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We have before us this morning a somewhat difficult scripture passage out of Luke’s gospel. It begins with a request that probably all of us can relate to. It ends with a discussion about slavery. It is difficult, at first, to figure out how these relate. What does *faith* have to do with *servitude*?

Let’s start with the request that the apostles make of Jesus: “Increase our faith.” It’s a reasonable request, don’t you think? Jesus has been asking them to do all sorts of difficult things, he’s been teaching them all sorts of hard teachings, he’s been telling them that horrible things are going to happen to him. The apostles have every reason to ask for more faith. More faith to be able to do the difficult things, more faith to follow the hard teachings, more faith to accept the harsh realities. We can certainly relate, can’t we? There are times we wish for more faith, aren’t there? More faith to be able to face the hardships and sufferings and tragedies in this life ... more faith to be able to have hope in the future of our country and our world ... more faith to be able to simply do the things Jesus asks us to do, and to be the kind of people Jesus asks us to be. There have been people I have known in my life who seemed to have a much stronger faith than I felt I had, and there have been times when I have wished that my faith was as strong as their faith. Why is it that some people just seem to *radiate* faith, while others feel like it’s more of a struggle, especially when times get tough, when things get bad?

And here are the apostles – the twelve people who were closer to Jesus than any other – asking Jesus to increase *their* faith. It’s comforting, in a way – even *they*, whom we now recognize as great saints and pillars in the church, felt that their faith was lacking – so lacking that, one day, they begged Jesus to give them more of it. “Increase our faith!” Give us more! Make it bigger! Make it *stronger*!

So what does Jesus do? Does he grant them their request? Imagine if he did. “Here you go – have some more faith!” They ask, he gives, their faith *explodes*. No more wavering, no more doubts, no more fear. But no. He doesn’t just *give* them more faith. He talks to them instead about the things they could do if their faith *were* stronger. “If you had faith the size of a mustard seed,” he begins – and a mustard seed is *very small*, it’s just a little seed of grain, yet when it is planted and sprouts and grows, the plant that results can be as large as ten feet! – “if you had faith the size of a mustard seed,” he says, basically implying that they don’t have even *that* much faith – “you could say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea,’ and it would obey you.” If you apostles even had a *tiny* amount of faith, he is saying, you could make *miracles* happen.

But, apparently, they don't. At least, not yet. Some of those apostles do great miracles later on – when the Holy Spirit comes upon them, in the Book of Acts – but here in the gospels they're still pretty much just ordinary people. Lots of questions, lots of uncertainty, and – apparently – not much faith.

So Jesus' words to them almost sounds like a rebuke. "If you had even a *tiny amount of faith*, you could perform miracles!" But they don't. So they can't. Not yet.

So, note that Jesus does *not* grant their request. He does *not* endow them with great amounts of faith. Not here. Not now. What, does he expect them to be able to produce it on their own?

Then, abruptly, he changes topics. He starts talking to them about slavery. He paints a little picture for them, a word picture. Let's imagine you have a slave, he is saying. Now when you hear the word "slave" in the New Testament, remember that it can always be translated as "servant." Imagine you have a servant. Someone whose job it is to do your bidding. You make sure they have a place to live, food on the table, enough money to live by. But the primary purpose of their life is to serve you. Wealthy people all over the ancient world had servants. It was "normal," it was just part of how things were, people didn't question it, and – by and large – slaves weren't abused or mistreated, certainly not to the extent that they were in our country. They did their jobs, and their masters took care of their basic needs. So, Jesus says, let's imagine that *you* had a servant like that. *You* are one of those rich people who has a servant who does a lot of hard work for you. They plow your fields. They tend your sheep. They come in after doing a hard job. Do you invite them to sit down and have dinner with you? No, of course not. Not in *that* world. That's not what was done. No, they still need to fix your dinner, even after doing a hard job outside. There's a master-servant relationship here. *Their* job is to do *your* bidding. You don't sit down to dinner with them, as if they were your equal. That would be absurd!

So Jesus is not up-ending social conventions here. He's using this scenario as an illustration for the apostles. He has a point he's trying to make, so bear with the analogy, and let's figure out where he's going.

You don't sit down with your servant to eat dinner together. You just simply expect them to continue doing their job. Let them fix your dinner. Then, later, they can eat their own, when they are done with their work for the day. "Do you thank the slave," asks Jesus, "for doing what was commanded?" No. Again, that would not be in keeping with the social norms. They're not doing you an act of service for which thanks are to be rendered. You are not equals here in this relationship. They are your servant, pure and simple. You simply expect them to do what you tell them to do. And, frankly, they would probably be surprised if you *did* thank them. That's just not how things were done.

So where is Jesus going with all this? What's his point? The clincher comes in verse 10: "So you also, when you have done all that you were ordered to do, say, 'We are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done!'" Suddenly the tables are turned; the apostles are no longer envisioning themselves as wealthy masters; they are now in the role of being servants. Their job is simply to do what their master is telling them to do. They should not expect thanks or gratitude; they should not expect to be invited to sit down at their master's table; they should just simply *do the jobs that their master is expecting them to do*. No making a fuss, no complaining, no trying to get out of it,

no expecting to receive something special from it, some kind of reward. Just *do the jobs your master is telling you to do*.

And who is their master?

Yep, that's right. It's not anyone here on this earth. It's not "master" with a lower-case "m." It's "Master" with a capital "M"; "Lord" with a capital "L". It's *Jesus*. It's *God*.

So what's the point? What is Jesus trying to say? Simple. *Do the jobs that God is expecting you to do*. You are God's servant. God's *slave*. Maybe that wording feels uncomfortable. Deal. *He is your Master*. He's not your equal. You don't get pretend you are equals. You are loved, deeply loved, treasured and valued, but you are not equals, not best friends, not bosom buddies. Your job, simply put, is to *do the will of your Master*. Period. No "if"s, no "and"s, no "but"s. No excuses, no whining, no complaining, no trying to get out of it. Just *do the job your Master is asking you to do*.

How do you know what that job is? Well, we have a book, right? Read the gospels. Study the scriptures. Listen to Jesus. What does he tell you to do? What should be the #1 priority in your life? How are you supposed to treat other people? It all basically boils down to just two teachings, which Jesus lays out for us very clearly. When in doubt, when you are unsure of what path to take, when you are dealing with a situation that isn't directly covered in the book, well, *ask God*. Pray. "God, tell me what you want me to do here!" And then, don't forget to *listen!* Really, really *listen*.

We're all very good at loading up our requests to God. "Lord, help me." "Lord, help my friend." "Lord, heal my loved one." We bring up bucketloads of wishes and requests to God. We basically ask God to serve *us*, to meet *our* needs, time and time again. And that's fine, there's nothing wrong with laying our requests before God's throne of grace; there are plenty of great examples throughout the scriptures of people doing just that. But don't forget that he doesn't exist for the primary purpose of responding to *our* requests. Rather, *we* exist for the primary purpose of responding to *his* requests. *There are things he wants us to do!* There are ways he wants us to serve him! How often do you turn to God in your prayer life, and genuinely ask God to tell *you* what to do? Those kind of prayers probably ought to take precedence. It is not fair to continually ask God to serve *us* if we're not willing to let God tell us how he wants us to serve *him*. We're not the master in this relationship. *He* is.

So why does Jesus leap from the apostles' request "Increase our faith!" to this discussion about the proper relationship between a master and a servant? Well, think about it. What had the apostles just done? *They'd told Jesus what they wanted him to do for them*. They had envisioned – at least for a moment – that *they* could order *him* around. (They didn't even say *please!*)

Maybe they had it backwards. Sure, they needed more faith. *We all* need more faith. But maybe they should have been asking for something else. Or, at least, asking the question *differently*. "Jesus, we're trying to do your will. We're having a hard time at it. Can you give us a greater measure of strength and faith so that we can do a better job at doing the things *you* want us to do?" Maybe they were being a bit too self-serving. Maybe they needed a reminder of who was truly the Master.

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