

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod
Pentecost 17
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Sermon by Pastor Jon D. Buchholz
Lord, increase our faith

—Luke 17:1-10

Have you ever noticed that there are some questions that are difficult to truthfully answer “Yes”? “Are you sleeping?” If the person answers “Yes” to that one, they obviously are not sleeping—unless perhaps they’re sleep talking. Or how about the question, “Are you humble?” That’s a difficult question to answer in the affirmative because if you’re truly humble, how can you honestly talk about how humble you are? That’s not humility, that’s pride. How do you respond if someone asks you, “Are you a wise person?” This might force us to think a little bit, but we might come to the conclusion that only a fool would acclaim his own wisdom. Even the Greek philosopher Socrates said, “The only thing I know is that I know nothing.” Or what do you think of the question, “Do you have a strong faith?” With deep conviction, we might be tempted to jump all over that one and say, “Of course I have a strong faith in Jesus!” But then we might reflect and remember that a strong faith never looks in on itself. The strongest faith first recognizes its own weakness. We might remember the Scripture that says, “If you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don’t fall!” (1 Corinthians 10:12). The strongest faith looks outside of ourselves and fixes our eyes on Jesus.

All of us can echo the words of the apostles, “Increase our faith!” You want a stronger faith? What do expect from a stronger faith? Do you expect that you’ll feel better, be happier, life will go easier? Well, maybe it will turn out that way, but you also need to know that a stronger faith means more work. (No, I don’t mean that our work gets us into heaven; we’re saved by grace through faith alone. Jesus is going to make that point abundantly clear in the third part of our sermon today.) But a stronger faith, a stronger trust in Jesus, binds us closer to Jesus in a closer relationship with Jesus. And a closer relationship with Jesus means that we love more, and when we love more we serve more, and when we serve more we have a deeper commitment and more responsibility, and with more responsibility comes more work. So, understand what you’re asking for when you join your voice to the apostles and pray, “Increase our faith.”

Today Jesus gives us three concrete examples of what a stronger faith looks like—faith in action. We’re going to look at each of them in turn. First Jesus says, “*Temptations to sin are sure to come, but woe to the one through whom they come! ² It would be better for that person if a millstone would be hung around his neck and he would be thrown into the sea than for him to cause one of these little ones to sin. ³ Watch yourselves.*” A stronger faith means doing everything possible to avoid sin and to avoid causing others to sin.

This is another example where Jesus emphasizes how serious sin is. (We have several similar examples throughout the Gospels.) Jesus’ emphasis on the deadly consequences of sin stands in stark contrast to the casual attitude our sinful nature wants us to adopt: “It doesn’t matter if I sin; it’s no big deal. If I sin God will just forgive me because I believe in Jesus. I can always repent later.” That attitude is never condoned by Scripture. That attitude doesn’t come from the Spirit of Christ. At the time of the early Christian Church there were actually people who encouraged people to sin, so that they would receive more grace from God. Their logic went like this: We glorify God for his grace when he forgives our sins. The more we sin, the more God can forgive us. The more God forgives us, the more God is glorified. So, let’s bring glory to God by sinning! Let us do evil, that good may result. The Apostle Paul has some very choice words for people who think and act like this. In Romans 3 he says about such people, “Their condemnation is deserved” (Romans 3:8).

We place sins into two broad categories called “sins of commission” and “sins of omission.” Sins of commission are sins that we become guilty of when we do something that God forbids. We *commit* a sin of commission. God says, “Don’t,” and we do. God forbids something, but we do it anyway. A sin of omission is a sin we become guilty of when we don’t do something that God commands. God says, “Love me with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength,” but we don’t do that; we love other things more than we love God. Disobeying God’s command to remember the Sabbath day, to worship, to love God’s Word, is a sin of omission. Failing to honor our parents and others in authority is a sin of omission. God says, “Love your neighbor,” but we love ourselves more than we love our neighbor, and we ignore our neighbor in need. Our lack of love is a sin of omission. Our sinful nature loves to play fast and loose with sins of omission. We justify our behavior by saying, “But I didn’t do anything!” Exactly! That’s why it was a sin—because you didn’t do what God told you to do. And whether it’s a sin we commit or a sin of omission, the consequences are the same: The wages of sin is death (Romans 6:23). And if it’s deadly serious when we fall into sin, it’s double responsibility when we lead someone else into sin; now we’re not only guilty of our own sin but we incur additional responsibility for someone else’s spiritual condition. No wonder Jesus says it would be better to be drowned with a millstone around their neck rather than to cause a little child (or anyone, for that matter) to sin!

So instead of a casual, indifferent approach toward sin, let’s pray, “Lord, increase our faith!” and with a stronger faith let’s take his words very seriously. One of the stanzas of a Communion hymn says, “Lord, let me loathe all sin forever

as death and poison to my soul, that I through willful sinning never may see your judgment take its toll. Lord, may your body and your blood be for my soul the highest good.” Start each day with a prayer: *Lord God, heavenly Father, almighty and everlasting God, I thank you that you have brought me to the beginning of this new day. I pray that you would defend me with your mighty power, and grant that this day I fall into no sin, nor run into any kind of danger, but that all I do may be righteous in your sight through Jesus Christ, my Lord.*

Jesus continues with his second example of faith in action: *“If your brother sins, rebuke him. If he repents, forgive him. ⁴ Even if he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times returns to you and says, ‘I repent,’ forgive him.”* His words are clear: forgive, as you have been forgiven.

This is another teaching that Jesus drives home repeatedly in his ministry. For example, in the Lord’s Prayer Jesus teaches us to pray, “Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.” Jesus tells the parable of the unmerciful servant, where a servant who owes a huge debt to the king has all his debt forgiven but then turns around and refuses to forgive a fellow servant who owes him a few bucks. There’s a reason Jesus presses home this point so frequently: A heart that holds a grudge against his fellow human being cannot receive forgiveness from God; it’s impossible. When we refuse to forgive someone who has wronged us, we are placing ourselves on a pedestal and looking down at that person. We’re saying, “The sin that you hurt me with is greater than the sins I have committed. Your sins are worse than mine.” It’s a form of spiritual pride. And a heart that is proud is simply in no condition to receive forgiveness from God. “The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise” (Psalm 51:17).

The foundation of forgiveness is very simple: God has forgiven you the entire debt of your sins by laying your debt on Jesus. Do the comparison: look at the huge pile of manure that you and I have stacked up in the presence of God, an offense to his holy nostrils, and then look at the sins others have committed against us. There’s no comparison! Yet God, in his tender mercy and love, showed compassion to you and to me and to the whole human race, and he washed away the entire pile of guilt with the holy, precious blood of Jesus. This is one of the powerful truths about Jesus’ resurrection. When Jesus rose from the dead, he showed that he really is the Son of God who has power over death, and he showed that our sins really are forgiven. God accepted Jesus’ perfect sacrifice on the cross and raised his Son from the dead to prove it. Jesus was delivered over to death for our sins, he was raised to life for our justification (Romans 4:25). Forgiving others comes so naturally to Christians because we know the forgiving heart of God, and we want to mirror God’s love and forgiveness for us and reflect it to others.

So, if someone has wronged you, let it go! Holding onto someone’s sin against you and stewing over it is like drinking poison yourself and expecting the other person to die. Chances are, they don’t even know you are holding a grudge against them! Meanwhile, you’re being consumed by it—and as you’re consumed by it, you’re robbing yourself of peace, you’re missing out on the reconciliation with your neighbor, and you’re cutting yourself off from God’s forgiveness. Even if someone has wronged you grievously, repeatedly, let it go! Forgive them. Saint Paul writes to the Romans, “If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, maintain peace with everyone” (Romans 12:18). God says to you, “Your sins are forgiven.” Now it is your privilege as a disciple of Christ to say to those who have wronged you, “I forgive you!”

And that brings us to the third realization of a stronger faith: ⁶ *The Lord said, “If you had faith like a mustard seed, you could tell this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea,’ and it would obey you. ⁷ Which one of you who has a servant plowing or taking care of sheep will say to him when he comes in from the field, ‘Come at once and recline at the table’? ⁸ Won’t the master tell him instead, ‘Prepare my supper, and after you are properly dressed, serve me while I eat and drink. After that you may eat and drink’? ⁹ He does not thank the servant because he did what he was commanded to do, does he? ¹⁰ So also you, when you have done all that you were commanded, say, ‘We are unworthy servants. We have only done what we were supposed to do.’”* An immature faith or a misplaced faith thinks that we can do God favors and that God ought to reward us in return. The Prophet Isaiah rebuked the people of Judah for thinking that God should notice all the good things they were doing. The people of Judah said, “We’re fasting, God, we’re making sacrifices for you, but you’re not noticing. Pay attention, God, to what we’re doing for you” (see Isaiah 58). Perhaps you’ve felt that God should notice the especially generous gifts that you’ve been giving to church lately. That ought to score a few points, right? A misplaced faith looks to be rewarded; a strong faith realizes, “God doesn’t owe me anything.”

Jesus uses this analogy of a servant, who comes in from the field. He’s worked all day, he’s tired, but there is still more to do. Now he still needs to get the evening meal ready for his master. Should the servant be entitled to some special recognition because he worked hard all day? No, that’s what he’s *supposed* to do. So you feel like you had a pretty good day keeping the commandments, and maybe God should show you a little extra kindness because you’ve been a good boy or a good girl. Seriously? First, we daily sin much and shatter the commandments on a regular basis, and second, even if we were able to walk the straight and narrow path with God all day, what reward would we earn? That’s what we’re *supposed* to do!

But here's the beauty: God pours out his blessings into your life, not because you've earned them, but because God is God and God is gracious and God is good and God has loved you with an everlasting love and called you by name. That's what God's grace is: it's love for the wicked, love for the undeserving, love for sinners, love for you, and love for me. It's love for love's sake, coming from God who loved you and gave himself for you to wash away your sins and to make you his precious possession, his beautiful bride for all eternity.

So why pray, "Lord, increase our faith?" First, because as we cling more tightly to Jesus our Savior and trust his promises, we grow in love and service. God is honored and praised, and our neighbor is served. And second, as we cling more tightly to Jesus our Savior and trust his promises, we enjoy not just fleeting happiness but deep joy and comfort and peace. And the peace of God that surpasses all understanding guard your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus! Amen.