

Faith & Duty

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 21 February 2021

Preacher: Benjamin Wilks

[0 : 00] This morning's reading is from Luke chapter 17, reading from verse 1 to verse 10. Luke chapter 17, reading from verse 1. Jesus said to his disciples, Things that cause people to stumble are bound to come, but woe to anyone through whom they come.

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. So watch yourselves. If your brother or sister sins against you, rebuke them.

And if they repent, forgive them. 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.

The apostle said to the Lord, increase our faith. 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.

Suppose one of you has a servant ploughing 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?

[1 : 09] 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. Will he thank the servant because he did what he was told to do?

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. Okay, folks.

As I mentioned when we had our reading, last week we looked, didn't we, at the first four verses of that passage. Hopefully you have at least a vague recollection of what we looked at there, the difficult challenges that we saw Jesus presenting, that responsibility for how we relate to one another, guarding against leading others into sin, and rebuking those who might fall into sin, whilst also being ready to forgive.

Those challenges in the background from verses one to four, maybe you found those ideas rather daunting. Well, if you did, then you are in good company, because I think it's in light of that big challenge, I think it's in light of that that Luke presents the plea of verse five.

The apostles said to the Lord, increase our faith. And in Jesus' response to that request, we see something of the nature of true faith.

[2 : 32] That's our first heading this morning. And then moving into verses seven to ten, we'll be asking, what am I owed? So, so the nature of true faith.

The disciples, the disciples asked for an increase of their faith. Isn't this a great prayer? I want to believe more. I want to be more convinced.

God, I want to trust you more. It's a great prayer, isn't it? It sounds great. Some commentators go to great lengths about how we should copy the disciples' example in asking for an increase of faith.

J.C. Ryle says, faith is the root of saving religion. It's the secret of all Christian comfort and spiritual prosperity. According to a man's faith, will be his peace, his hope, his strength, his courage, his decision, and his victory over the world.

When the apostles made requests about faith, they did wisely and well. Now, folks, you've heard me quote J.C. Ryle enough times over the past months that he's usually wise and helpful, isn't he?

[3 : 37] But I think he's missed the mark here. Even the wisest of men make mistakes in our interpretation. We all of us, we must go back to what God's word actually says.

When I first read Ryle on this, I was nodding along with these things that he says. But look, look, look, do you see how Jesus responds in verse six?

Jesus 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. Now, folks, if the disciples request in verse five, if that were the right request in that context, then wouldn't Jesus have said, oh, you're right, this

is a tall order.

I will indeed increase your faith. And we'd all then respond by emulating their example and trying to increase our faith. We'd strive to that end, not least in prayer.

But that's not how Jesus responds, is it? Jesus doesn't say, I will increase your faith. No, he presents a picture of what faith can do.

[4 : 42] Faith can uproot a mulberry tree and plant it in the sea. If there's a significance, by the way, to it being a mulberry particularly, if there's a significance rather than just, you know, there happened to be one over there, if there's a significance to the mulberry, it's that the mulberry was proverbially deep-rooted.

It is hard to uproot a mulberry tree. But uprooting it, I think, is conceivably attainable. Presumably people have done it. You know, you dig down deep enough, you can eventually uproot the tree. That is attainable. That is, therefore, has nothing compared to the prospect of then planting that tree in the sea. Notice the tree is not cast into the sea, not kind of chucked over the cliff edge and abandoned.

No, the tree is planted in the sea. By faith, a mulberry tree will obey a command to be planted in the sea. Does that not imply that its position is maintained despite the shifting currents and oceans? Doesn't it imply that this tree is then somehow nourished for the long term, that it is sustained in the sea? Despite these bizarre circumstances, if the tree is planted there, it is maintained there.

[5 : 59] Faith has somehow attained not just a flash in the pan, not just a one-off thing. No, it has obtained an ongoing miraculous occurrence. Of course, this isn't an invitation to the apostles, an invitation to you and I to occupy ourselves with pointless irrelevances like moving trees from place to place.

No, Jesus says here that nothing is impossible with faith. Faith can accomplish even that which science leads us to deny as impossible. Faith can accomplish what our best reasoning would say it isn't going to happen.

Faith can see a church that from the outside looks dead. Faith can see that church revitalized and proclaiming the gospel to the glory of God. Faith can see my dead heart made alive in Christ. Faith can achieve the impossible. See what great things can be achieved if you only have great faith. No.

No. No, Jesus says such striking things could be achieved by faith, even faith as small as a mustard seed. Do you see, Jesus' response is not to increase their faith.

[7 : 13] Jesus' response is to say they already have faith enough. Even the grammar points towards this. The particular form of the if construction that Jesus uses here.

It's a form that kind of assumes the condition is true. It's assumed that they do have at least this much faith. Even a tiny faith is sufficient to accomplish great things.

Why is that? Well, it's because the criterion for achieving great things isn't the magnitude of the faith.

The criterion is the capacity of the one believed. If you like, what the disciples need isn't an increase of faith, it's to exercise the faith that they have.

What's needed isn't great faith, it's faith in a great God. Think about it like this. Imagine, if you will, imagine a massive cargo ship, okay?

[8 : 12] And the ship is far out to sea and you're standing on the shore. So you see this massive vessel as barely more than a speck on the horizon. Friends, what determines the cargo capacity of that ship?

That's governed by how the ship's designed, right? By how big the deck is, by how much weight it can bear without sinking. There is nothing that you, standing on the shore, can do to affect the cargo capacity of that vessel.

No more can you, stood here, affect, by an increase of your faith, what God can accomplish. Your faith maybe is something like a pair of binoculars.

With binoculars, you could see that vessel more clearly. You could better judge its capacity.

Stronger binoculars would let you see with greater clarity. But better and better binoculars don't change how many containers fit on that deck.

All it changes is how many of them you can see. Well, no more does an increase of faith affect what God can achieve. It isn't faith that enlivens dead hearts.

[9 : 21] It's God who does that. So it may well be well and good to take an eye to our faith, to ask, is it true faith or is it counterfeit, to consider the state of our hearts.

It may even be good to pray for our faith to be increased. But friends, that is not the most vital. There's a danger that in looking to our faith we neglect the object of our faith.

Your faith was not crucified for you. You were not baptised in the name of your faith. Look first to your Saviour.

Look to Christ. This is the mistake that's being made when people say, oh, I wish I had your faith. It's not a question of mustering up faith.

Look to Christ. See his faithfulness. See how worthy an object of your faith he is. Trust in him and in him alone. A response of faith.

[10 : 23] Verses 7 to 10 then pick up another possible response to these challenges. A response to verses 1 to 4. Suppose I'm successful in doing what's commanded in verses 1 to 4.

Suppose I avoid causing others to stumble. Suppose I lovingly offer rebuke when it's needed.

Suppose I mercifully extend forgiveness time after time after time as many as seven times a day.

I forgive. Suppose even, verses 5 and 6, suppose I have great faith. Suppose I do all these things.

What then am I owed? What am I entitled to as recompense for my labours?

What will be my reward for going to these great lengths for the benefit of others? That's the question that lies behind this brief parable in these last few verses.

What am I owed? Now, for starters, for starters, let's remember this parable is set in the first century world. Okay, don't get distracted by the question of whether it's good and proper to have slaves and servants.

[11 : 23] Just accept this is a time and place where that is normal and everyday. You didn't have to be all that well off to have at least one servant. Several, well maybe that's the preserve of much wealthier families, but one, this is not too unusual.

And that seems to be the situation here in the parable because this same servant is responsible both for the work in the field and for the household service as well. And whether Jesus' immediate audience were in this situation themselves or not, they're familiar enough with the idea for the answer to Jesus' question to be obvious.

Suppose one of you has a servant ploughing 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? The answer's obvious, isn't it?

Of course not. Obviously that's not what you say. That would be antithetical to the purpose of having a servant. You don't keep a dog and bark yourself.

You don't have servants and cook your own meal. For sure you don't cook their meals for them.

Now what does a servant do when he comes in from the field? He prepares his master's food.

[12 : 28] He serves at the table and only once that's done can he concern himself with his own comfort. That's what servants do. This much is blindingly obvious at least to Jesus' audience and I hope to us as well.

This is the way things are. Your car does not deserve special credit for conveying you from A to B. That's just what it's designed to do. Your servant doesn't deserve special thanks for serving the meal.

That's just his job. Jesus says that's the situation we ourselves are in. Verse 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.

We've only done our duty. However much you think you have done it is no more than your duty. It is no more than is expected of you. In no sense is God indebted to you.

In no way are you owed anything in recompense. Friends, if this is true on the level of masters and servants how much more is this true in the relationship between God and humanity?

[13 : 42] Now, it goes against the grain a little bit, doesn't it? We want it to be the case that we're owed something and sometimes we tell ourselves that we are owed something.

Sometimes we imagine that on the last day that God will be pleased with us because we donated thousands of pounds to the church building project. That he'll be pleased with us because we chose a less financially rewarding career in order to serve him.

That he'll be pleased with us because we've forgiven our brothers and sisters. That he'll be pleased with us because we've given our health given even our lives in order to proclaim good news to

others. We imagine God will be pleased with us.

We imagine we are owed something. We imagine we'll be entitled to some special reward when we come into God's kingdom. Or even worse, we think we're entitled to a reward here and now.

And that can have dangerous results, can't it? Because when we think we're entitled to a reward now, then we get angry with God when we think he hasn't delivered on what we deserve.

[14:46] I gave up all this for you, God. And yet somehow I'm still living in a hovel. Somehow my wife still got cancer. Somehow I'm still suffering. Don't you know who I am, God?

Don't you know what I deserve? Don't you know what I've done for you? Haven't I done enough? Am I not entitled to something from your hands? Here's what I mean.

Here's the West Wing. Here's President Bartlett talking to God after the funeral of his secretary of many, many years. You're a son of a b***h, you know that? She bought her first new car and you hit her with a drunk driver.

What? Is that supposed to be funny? You can't conceive, nor can I, of the appalling strangeness of the mercy of God, says Graham Green.

I don't know whose ass he was kissing there because I think you're just vindictive. What was Josh Lyman? A warning shot? That was my son.

[15:52] What did I ever do to yours but praise his glory and praise his name? There's a tropical storm that's gaining speed and power.

They say we haven't had a storm this bad since you took out that tender ship of mine in the North Atlantic last year. 68 crew. You know what a tender ship does?

Fixes the other ships. Doesn't even carry guns. Just goes around, fixes the other ships and delivers the mail. That's all it can do. Gracias, tibiago, domine.

Yes, I lied. It was a sin. I've committed many sins. Have I displeased you, you feckless thug? 3.8 million new jobs. That wasn't good. Bailed out Mexico, increased foreign trade, 30 million new acres of land for conservation.

Put Mendoza on the bench. We're not fighting a war. I've raised three children. That's not enough to buy me out of the doghouse. Hey, Kratom, adeo pio.

[16:59] Adeo justo. Adeo chito. Krukiatos in crucem. Tu es in terra servos, nun dias fui.

Officium perfece. Krukiatos in crucem. Eas in crucem. You get Hines.

that's not enough to buy me out of the doghouse have I not done enough for you God am I not entitled no no you aren't much as this speech is understandable in context of the events of the episode much as there are discussions that we could have about suffering and how we respond to it that's true but you don't get to say okay God I've served my time now pay up I suspect most of you recoil from that portrayal on some level I suspect we're uncomfortable with it but isn't the truth also that we are somewhere on that spectrum some of the time ourselves our attainments probably aren't quite on the scale of what a president can accomplish and maybe we wouldn't come anywhere close to the language that he uses though maybe in the pain of the moment we say them in our hearts even if not out loud but whether they're expressed in these terms or not I think that sense of entitlement is alive and well in many of our hearts

I suspect it's alive in many of our hearts because I know it often is in mine I look and say here are the sacrifices I've made what do I get I think to myself here are the ways that I've served you God where are my thanks it's a profoundly unhealthy attitude to God it's dishonouring it's destructive it despoils our satisfaction in God how can we rejoice in the Lord we're called to serve how can we rejoice in him if we're busy being grumpy about what we think we deserve and sometimes sometimes when God fails to reward us in the way we think he should we take matters into our own hands don't we here's everything I've done so now I will reward myself here's how I've suffered I'll sort something out in compensation now rewards even compensation this is not an inherently negative thing it's okay for employers to pay their workers indeed they should do so compensation is fine it's okay even for you to reward yourself

I'll concentrate well on my schoolwork for these two hours and then when it's time for a break I can read the book I'm enjoying at the moment I can eat that bar of chocolate I've worked hard this week I'll enjoy a nice glass of wine and a bath rewards are okay but if we think we're entitled to them and therefore we become bitter when we don't get them well that's a problem and of course when the things that we reward ourselves with are sinful then that's a problem isn't it you can probably see how those examples can be kind of taken to to a sinful extreme and sometimes it's even clearer isn't it I'm entitled to a reward and I don't have the money for it so I'll just slip this into my pocket in

the shop God won't mind because I've done so many good things I'm working as a missionary surely it's okay for me to massage the figures on my tax return to make ends meet I've suffered enough in my life

[21 : 07] I'm not getting any love in my marriage I'm entitled to love wherever I can find it I've worked so hard this week I need to relax this weekend I deserve to go out and get drunk do you see how easy it is to slip into dangerous patterns of thinking do you see how unhealthy it is to feel entitled compensation from God my friends God does not owe us anything at the end we should only say we are unworthy servants we have only done our duty to demand recompense from God is abhorrent we should be appalled by it in our own hearts but my friends it is not unforgivable even to rail against God like Jed Bartlett it is not beyond being covered by the blood of Jesus it's not in knowing that you're saved by faith alone by God's grace alone that you are saved but it is by faith alone in God's grace alone it's not in knowing it it is in the fact of it salvation is by faith not by correct knowledge or by perfect deeds so friends be cautioned by this parable be cautioned by these verses but do not despair cast yourself on God's mercy and we have when we have done that what then is our proper attitude to God what is our response our response then is not entitlement but rather thanksgiving and it's to that that we will turn in the next section of chapter 17 that we come to next week let's pray

Lord Jesus thank you that you are worthy thank you that you are a sure foundation for our faith thank you that though our faith be slight if it is in you it is sufficient it is sufficient for our salvation it is sufficient that we can achieve great things it is sufficient that we can do all that you call us to guard that faith in us we ask nurture it even grow it give us increased confidence that we might know might know you more might know you more fully might revel more in what you have done and are doing and as we see what you enable us to do as we see the things that we can accomplish in your service Lord guard us guard us against this attitude of entitlement guard us against that inclination to reward ourselves to demand something from your hand to expect recompense from you Lord Lord we are sorry when that has been our attitude we are sorry when that attitude has overflowed into sinful deeds we are sorry and we ask for your forgiveness we ask that you would guard our hearts in the days the weeks the months the years that lie ahead Lord keep us faithful to you in order that we might one day say we are unworthy servants we have only done our duty Amen Amen Amen Amen Amen Amen.