

***“Even Faith Like A Grain of Mustard Seed” (Luke 17:1-10)***

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**Pastor Espinosa**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. We remain in the season of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit through the Word of Christ also teaches us how to live as disciples of Jesus. We are being reminded that while faith in Jesus alone is our salvation, that such genuine faith is never alone; a real life follows. We pray that the Lord would open our eyes and lead us to live as we are called to live in Christ, through the power of His Word which creates and nourishes faith, and of course through the Holy Spirit given to the Church at Pentecost and given to you personally at your little Pentecost when you were baptized into the death and resurrection of Jesus. This morning’s Gospel -- Luke 17:1-10 -- is another place in God’s Word describing your new life. By God’s grace, may these words be more than just words to us; may we live them out!

The practical concern that Jesus expressed as recorded in Luke 17 is that the Pharisees and the scribes were causing dangerous offense to the people who were inclined to believe in Jesus and who were in fact already coming to faith in Him (Lenski, *Interpretation of Luke’s Gospel*, 862). These precious “little ones” of Jesus, however, were now being threatened by the false teaching of those attacking Christ. These attacks are variously translated as “temptations,” “stumbling blocks,” or “offenses,” and Jesus said that it is impossible that these would *not* occur. They *do* occur and *will continue* to occur, because of the evil in the world. You must count on this Christian, you must be prepared and you must be on high alert. However, these translations might not be severe enough to get the point across. What was happening here and what still happens to this day is that these “temptations” and “stumbling blocks” are like deathtraps that can destroy another person’s faith.

Francis Pieper gives a good definition of what the issue is: “Seducing others to sin the Scriptures call ‘giving offense,’ ...We may define it thus: To give offense means to teach or to do something by which we lead another not to believe or to believe error or to lead a wicked life and thus cause him, as far as we are involved, to perish eternally (Christian Dogmatics, Vol. I, 561).”

All of this teaches us dear Christians that how we live – what we do and do not do – and how we speak – what we say and do not say is very important indeed. We are not islands unto ourselves. It *matters* what we do and say. The Christian who says, “What I do is nobody’s business!” is speaking in ignorance. Cain asked God the terribly ignorant and sinful question, “Am I my brother’s keeper (Genesis 4:9)?” Answer: As a matter a fact, yes you are! We are

called to encourage each other, not tear each other down; we are called to protect each other, not harm each other. Ask any parent who understands their high responsibility: "Does it matter what your children hear you say? Does it matter what your children see you do?" Answer: absolutely! Does it matter what your children say and do at school since they represent their family, their church, and their Lord? Answer: you betcha! Can our words and actions lead others to sin? Answer: yes! Is it possible for our words and actions to negatively impact someone so much that that other person could lose their faith (a terrifying prospect)?! With fear and trembling, we must admit the truth: the answer is yes.

Judas was tempted for possessions and the love of power and it led to his apostasy (Just, *Luke 9:51-24:53*, 643). I once knew a woman who was so terrified by what a pastor taught in Bible Study about predestination, that she said she would never go back to Bible Study again (thank God that she *did* come back). But how many people have we heard of who were so hurt and offended in a church, that they have declared that they will never go back?! In 2006, Richard Dawkins released his atrocious bestseller *The God Delusion*. Afterwards I was watching an episode of 20/20 (if I'm thinking of the right program): There were two Christian pastors -- with cloaked faces and altered voices -- testifying that they had lost their faith from reading this book (the really terrifying thing is that they continued to be pastors)! By the way, Alister McGrath with his wife Joanna wrote an effective Christian apologetic in response to the Dawkins' book entitled *The Dawkins Delusion*. Michael Ruse, Professor of Philosophy, Florida State University states on the cover: "*The God Delusion makes me embarrassed to be an atheist, and the McGraths show why.*"

But in many cases, the damage is already done! People can be tempted to lose faith from the death-traps of grief, or when scientism is falsely presented as true science (as is the case with Dawkins), or when the presence of evil is brought into a person's life through another person, or through guilt of past sins (*Concordia Journal Volume 24, Number 3, July, 1998, 293-295*). And the Lord says that this is such a serious offense that, "It would be better for [the one causing offense or setting the death trap] if a millstone were hung around his neck and he were cast into the sea than that he should cause one of these little ones to sin [lose faith] (v 2)."

The Lord, however, is so protective and loving that He then taught the disciples (and teaches you and me through His Word) about how to avoid causing such terrible offense. He commanded them and commands us through the Word: "Beware of yourselves!" Again, be on high alert! Pay attention to yourself people of God! Don't be like worldly people who speak and act in such a way as to discourage or even destroy faith in those around them, but rather focus on these two things which counter harming faith in others, because these two things serve to actually do the exact opposite: these two things help and protect your fellow Christians:

- 1) If your fellow Christian sins – if you observe this – rebuke him.
- 2) If your fellow Christian repents – if you observe this – forgive him.

A rebuke is not a judgmental attack. It does *not* attack the person, but allows God’s Word to speak to the sin. This is not about losing our temper; but it is the loving act of restoring a fellow Christian and doing so in a humble way since we are also fellow sinners. In this – as I’ve said – we protect each other. Let’s read Galatians 6:1-2 together:

***“<sup>1</sup>Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted. <sup>2</sup>Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.”***

And then there is the second aspect which protects: when that same person expresses sorrow and regret, forgive them! Use your station as a royal priest and share the powerful forgiveness of sins in Jesus! “In other words, the disciples are not to become stumbling blocks by withholding forgiveness that should be extended to repentant sinners (Just, 644).” But if we withhold forgiveness we inflict grave harm to ourselves and to the other person. To ourselves, we can develop a hardened heart; to others we can cause great despair.

When the apostles heard this they were greatly alarmed. They were probably thinking to themselves, “How can we do this?” So at least one of them cried out, “Add to our faith (v 5)!” It was like saying, “We need our faith increased so that we are able to properly rebuke when we must rebuke; and we need our faith increased so that we are able to forgive our brother even seven times in one day!” If we are to do this, we need Jesus to add to our faith!

Jesus reply at verse 6 is fascinating and we have to get it right. The ESV translation, “*If you had faith...*” is pessimistic and seems to lose the original. Jesus is actually informing them, “*If you have faith...*” in the sense that since you *do* have faith, this is what can happen. And dear Christian, Jesus is speaking to you too and this is indeed my favorite part of today’s proclamation:

Jesus informs you dear Christian that you *do* have the faith from God to protect yourself and your fellow Christians. “All [such faith] needs to do is to act, and in its testing of the promise concerning the gospel that faith will grow and grow (Lenski, 869).” “For faith is a vessel; its power lies, not in being a vessel, but in what it contains as a vessel (ibid, 867).” This vessel is in you Christian and what really matters is what it holds! You received this faith when

the same Word that called the universe into existence from nothing, called your faith into existence from nothing. And the Lord then describes the power of His gift of faith for you:

*“And the Lord said, ‘If you **have** faith like a grain of mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea,’ and it would obey you (v 6).”*

Take a look at how small mustard seeds are:



Jesus uses this language to assure you that when it comes to your faith dear Christian, it isn't about your faith itself being great, massive, heroic or striking (or easily recognizable as such), “but that even a minimum faith is enough for the performance of what is impossible (a miracle) to men (Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV.2*, 233).” And what is the miracle our Lord is describing? It is the spreading of the saving Gospel: it is the uprooting of the “tree”/or the person in the world who is lost, and then replanting that person into the Kingdom of God. This is exactly what the apostles were called to do and this is exactly what they did by the Lord's Word and Spirit! And this is what we are called to do: to rebuke the sin that would cause a person to become lost; and to forgive their sins through the Word and Sacrament to replant them to eternal life. This is what the Lord has done for you! It is a miracle and He has worked this miracle in your life, because you were once dead in sin, but now you've been made alive through the Gospel of Christ!

And it is humbling to consider: the Lord places this life-renewing ministry into our hands as His Church in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. So we have to be careful that we do not become proud, but that we remain humble! We have to remain humble to be good stewards of His forgiveness! We will do great things as His servants, but only because He is the One – Jesus alone – who is working in and through us. Our call is to simply do what He has called us to do! Consider these

modern parables and ask, “Who was really working the grace (from the *Concordia Journal* cited above, 295)?”

- (1) The Parable of the Wronged Wife: Once upon a time there was a wife whose husband had been unfaithful. She was crushed by his confession, and trust in her husband was shattered. She doubted if the marriage could survive. But he was filled with remorse, broke off the adultery, and begged for her forgiveness. The wife prayed, asking God to give her faith to know what to do. After a period of time, she forgave her husband, and the marriage was restored. To whose credit was the reconciliation?
- (2) The Parable of the Drunken Teens: Once upon a time there were two teenage friends out on a Friday night drinking. They ran off the road and the passenger was killed. The victim’s parents were filled with anger and grief at the loss of their son, and they spent their days praying that God would take the pain from their hearts. The driver was convicted of drunken driving and received his sentence. He was filled with grief and remorse. Before beginning the sentence, he visited the parents of his dead friend and asked for their forgiveness. They forgave him for his sin. To whose credit was the absolution of the drunken driver?
- (3) The Parable of the Distant Daughter: Once upon a time there was an elderly widow who had only one child, a daughter, who lived in a distant city. The daughter did not write her mother or call, except at Christmas and other major holidays. Though lonely, the widow always remembered her daughter in her prayers. The mother became ill, and the daughter returned home. The daughter was sorry for her years of neglect. She asked for forgiveness. Her mother quickly gave it. To whose credit was the widow’s ready forgiveness?

Dear Christian, rejoice, the Lord has already increased your faith. He had done it through Holy Baptism, through His Word proclaimed and through His Holy Absolution put upon you once again this morning; and He continues to add to your faith every time you receive His body and His blood. The Lord has rebuked your sin – and led you to confession – and He has covered you in His forgiveness and this is what has added to your faith. Now in joy, we are glad to be His servants. As the sun obeys, the moon complies, and as the angels serve (*Ambrose, Ancient Christian Commentary, Luke, 267*), we now serve with the gift of increased faith, to rebuke when needed and to cover each other in the Lord’s forgiveness as we continue to live in the confession of sin and in the confession of Jesus, the One who has given us faith, the same Lord who has added to it and will continue to do so until the day that we see Him face-to-face!