

A Sermon  
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Grace Baptist Church  
Bryans Road, Maryland  
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## **The Demands and Rewards of Discipleship**

Luke 17:1-10

"Increase our faith!" That's the plea from Jesus' disciples in today's text from Luke. Remember that Jesus is en route to Jerusalem, where suffering and death await him. Along the way, crowds gather. Some people are seeking healing. Some are seeking nourishment, physically and spiritually. Some are seeking answers. Some are just curious. But Jesus reminds his closest followers that being a disciple is about way more than just having curiosity about religious matters. Discipleship is deep and demanding.

For example, there's the ever-present danger that you might cause another person to stumble, in other words, to sin. You might do something or say something that causes the person to abandon his or her faith or turn away from loyalty to Jesus and his teachings. So beware of behavior that could block or discourage or hinder someone from responding to God's call. According to Jesus, causing someone to stumble is serious business, deserving of what one commentator has called a "Mafia-style death," with a concrete block tied around their neck as they're cast into the sea.<sup>1</sup>

Then there's the matter of what to do when someone sins against you. It's one thing to offend against another person, especially a fellow believer. But what if someone, particularly another disciple, wrongs you in some way, perhaps even repeatedly? What should you do then? According to Jesus, the sin should be rebuked but repentance should be greeted with forgiveness. The goal in the community of believers is to sort things out, to move forward, and to live in restored relationship with those who sin against you.

After hearing what Jesus says about the severity and consequences of sinning against others, as well as the expectations of forgiveness and reconciliation, it's no wonder that the disciples ask for an increase in their faith. The demands that come with following Jesus are surely more than any human being is capable of, in and of themselves. Guarding against harming someone else's faith, coupled with confronting and forgiving someone's repeated sinfulness, is hard and heavy stuff. Clearly, the kind of righteousness that our Lord requires far exceeds our willingness and our abilities. So we ourselves join in the plea, "Lord, increase our faith!"

Jesus' response to our plea is challenging, partly because of the grammar in the text. He's essentially saying, "If you had faith [and you do]."<sup>2</sup> In other words, Jesus recognizes the presence of faith, even though it's small. But what matters isn't the size of the faith. What matters is the one in whom it's placed. Faith, after all, is hard to quantify. How could we measure it? Could you, for instance, look back and say, "Well, I estimate that my faith now is about 25 percent greater than it was this time last year."

Jesus doesn't approach faith that way. He focuses less on quantity and more on sufficiency. According to Jesus, even a small amount of faith, faith "the size of a mustard seed," when tied to the power of God, can generate results that far exceed human expectations and capabilities. So rather than fretting about whether our faith is great enough, we're told by

our Lord to take what faith we do have and put it to work. After all, he is the one who empowers the life of discipleship. When our faith lays hold of him, it really is possible for us to live by his teachings, including what he says about avoiding sin and forgiving those who sin against us.

Others have described faith as a kind of spiritual muscle. It requires exercise. When used regularly and strenuously, faith develops and gets stronger. But when neglected, it weakens and becomes less useful. This means that when we ask the Lord to “increase our faith,” we’re not primarily asking for more vital experiences of worship or more detailed instruction in doctrine, though these are certainly important. Rather, when we ask for an increase in our faith, we’re primarily asking for greater devotion to our Lord in the form of obedience to his teachings. When you actually implement Jesus’ instructions, both within and beyond the community of believers, that’s where allegiance becomes action. That’s where profession becomes practice. There in the actual doing is where faith increases.

This helps us understand the closing section of today’s text, where Jesus presses the demands of discipleship by employing the master-slave relationship. In some translations, including the NIV, the Greek term is rendered as “servant.” Though this term captures part of that particular position in the household, it doesn’t do full justice to the realities of life in the first century social order. The term literally means “slave.” We need to handle this kind of language and imagery carefully in our contemporary context, especially in light of the history of slavery in the United States and its enduring consequences in our society. We don’t do ourselves, and particularly the life of the church, any service by trying to gloss over the oppressive realities of enslavement.

One commentator has summarized it well by saying, “Slavery, the legal possession of an individual by another, was the primary “energy source” for the Greco-Roman world.”<sup>3</sup> Slaves were essentially nonpersons. They were property. Their daily life was determined by the will and plans of their masters. So it is for the slave in the closing parable of today’s Scripture. It feels like his work is never done. After a full day of working the fields and tending to the sheep, more duties await him. His master is hungry for dinner. Eventually the slave will get to eat, but not until his owner has been fed, and waited on hand and foot. Once satisfied, the master doesn’t owe the slave any gratitude. There will be no expression of thanks or affirmation for a job well done. The slave has simply done his duty. And the next day he will get up and do it all over again.

In July of 2021, *The New York Times* ran a special 55-page section about the 2.5 million essential service workers who kept New York City alive while many New Yorkers worked remotely. One of the heroes was Gustavo Ajeche, a 2004 immigrant from Guatemala. By day Gustavo works construction, and at night he delivers food for restaurants in the Financial District. His wife works as a nanny for a family in Manhattan. They use some of their earnings to help support their extended family back home in Guatemala. Their jobs often get little or no recognition or praise. At the end of the article, Gustavo said, “The pandemic was hard, but it taught me I can help. I would come home exhausted, but hearing ‘gracias’ or ‘God bless you,’ that was beautiful.”<sup>4</sup>

I think of the slave in Jesus’ parable, who rarely heard a “Thank you” or “God Bless You” from his master. All he usually got was a “Here, I’m done, take my plate,” or maybe, “Get some rest, because you’ve got a full day of work ahead of you tomorrow.” Every day was a matter of repeating his duties. He did them because that’s just what a servant/slave does.

Jesus’ parable can be a difficult story to build on when trying to describe the life of a disciple. Thankfully, we don’t live out our faith in a context where household slaves are part

of the established social order. But we can still learn from Jesus' emphasis on how being a disciple means being a servant of God. From beginning to end, our relationship with the Lord is about serving the Lord. None of us can claim that God is obligated to us, or that somehow God owes us. On the contrary, we're obligated to God. We owe God all that we are and all that we have, especially in view of what he has done for us through Jesus Christ.

In his book *The Reason for God*, pastor Tim Keller writes:

Some years ago I met with a woman who began coming to church at Redeemer and had never before heard a distinction drawn between the gospel and religion [i.e. the distinction between grace and what is often a works-based righteousness]. She had always heard that God accepts us only if we are good enough. She said that the new message was scary. I asked why it was scary and she replied: *If I was saved by my good works then there would be a limit to what God could ask of me or put me through. I would be like a taxpayer with "rights"—I would have done my duty and now I would deserve a certain quality of life. But if I am a sinner saved by grace—then there's nothing he cannot ask of me.*

She understood the dynamic of grace and gratitude. If when you have lost all fear of punishment you also lose all incentive to live a good, unselfish life, then the only incentive you ever had to live a decent life was fear. This woman could see immediately that the wonderful-beyond-belief teaching of salvation by sheer grace had an edge to it. She knew that if she was a sinner saved by grace, she was (if anything) more subject to the sovereign Lordship of God. She knew that if Jesus really had done all this for her, she would not be her own. She would joyfully, gratefully belong to Jesus, who provided all this for her at infinite cost to himself.<sup>5</sup>

Joyfully and gratefully belonging to Jesus. That's what discipleship is all about. Granted, at first glance, today's text can make it sound like being a follower of Christ is sheer drudgery. Just do what the Lord tells you to do. Do it without complaining. And don't expect any thanks or affirmation. "So you also," says Jesus, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty'" (v. 10).

At its most fundamental level, working out our relationship with God is a matter of duty. He's our Creator and Redeemer. None of us can say, "Well, I've done so much for the Lord and his kingdom. I've devoted myself to a long period of obedient service, doing most of what has been required of me. Surely this merits some commendation, some reward." But that way of thinking is just a rejection of grace as the basis of our relationship with God. In one of the sacred collections of Jewish traditions, there was a rabbi who said, "If you have studied the Torah, do not claim merit for yourself, since you were created for this."<sup>6</sup>

Created to be servants of God. That's who we are as followers of Jesus. And we serve God as a matter of duty. This doesn't mean that discipleship is devoid of all joy, or that there are no blessings in a life of service to the Lord. You know from your own experience that in one sense, discipleship does have its rewards. The fellowship you experience with God and with his people. The change you witness, and contribute to, in the lives of others. The ways God's reign shows up in our congregation and the community. The joy of steadfast devotion to Jesus Christ.

Karen Watson was a Southern Baptist missionary to Iraq. Prior to leaving for the Middle East, she wrote a letter dated March 7, 2003. Karen was killed, along with four other missionaries, on March 15, 2004. Her letter opens this way:

Dear Pastor Phil and Pastor Roger:

You should only be opening this letter in the event of my death.

When God calls there are no regrets. I tried to share my heart with you as much as possible, my heart for the nations. I wasn't called to a place. I was called to him. To obey was my objective, to suffer was expected, his glory my reward, his glory my reward.

After further expressions of gratitude, brief comments on preferences about her funeral service, and inspirational statements about the heart of a missionary, Karen closed the letter: "I was called not to comfort or success but to obedience.... There is no joy outside of knowing Jesus and serving him. I love you two and my church family."<sup>7</sup>

Lord, increase our faith. That's still our plea. May the Lord help each of us to take whatever measure of faith we have and live it out, putting it to work for his name's sake. May the Lord help us to trust him, and do what he says, not out of a desire for praise but to bring praise to him. May the Lord give us the strength and power to do what's required and expected of us as his followers, serving him faithfully and obediently, with his glory as our reward.

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<sup>1</sup> Darrell L. Bock, *Luke*. The IVP New Testament Commentary Series (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 1994) 279.

<sup>2</sup> Fred B. Craddock, *Luke*. Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville: John Knox, 1990) n.p.

<sup>3</sup> "Slavery in the First Century." Adapted from the *Holman Concise Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Holman Reference, 1998) 615.

<sup>4</sup> Todd Heisler and David Gonzales, "Essential But No Guarantees." *The New York Times* (July 23, 2021).

<sup>5</sup> Tim Keller, *The Reason for God* (New York: Riverhead, 2008) 189-190.

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in Bock, *Luke*, 281.

<sup>7</sup> "Keep Sending Missionaries." *Baptist Press* (March 24, 2004).