

Increasing Faith

Luke 17:1-10
SS Lesson for 05/01/2016

Devotional Scripture: 2 Peter 1:3-11

OUTLINE

INTRODUCTION

OVERVIEW AND KEY VERSE OF THE LESSON

Key Verse: Luke 17:5

Commentary from The Bible Knowledge Commentary

LESSON INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

From the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary

MAJOR THEME ANALYSIS

FAITH AND FORGIVENESS (LUKE 17:1-4)

Faith does not keep us from sin (1)

Does not keep us from sin because all have sinned (Rom 3:23)

Does not keep us from sin because no one is righteous (Eccl 7:20)

Does not keep us from sin because we cannot claim to be without sin (1 John 1:8-10)

Faith does not remove consequences of sin (2)

Because the consequence of sin is death (Rom 6:23)

Because the consequence of disobedience is punishment (Heb 2:2)

Because of the consequence of God's discipline (Heb 12:6)

Faith promotes forgiving one another (3)

Forgiving grievances (Col 3:13)

Forgiving using kindness and compassion (Eph 4:32)

Forgiving offences (Prov 19:11)

Faith requires no limit to forgiveness (4)

No limits because of love (1 Cor 13:4-8)

No limits because of wanting to win a brother back (Matt 18:15)

No limits because not judging or condemning (Luke 6:37)

FAITH AND EFFORT (LUKE 17:5-6)

Faith comes from God (5)

Faith comes from God in measures (Rom 12:3)

Faith comes from God through the manifestation of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 12:7-9)

Faith comes from God through maturing toward the fullness of Jesus (Eph 4:13)

Faith is trusting in God's power (6)

Trusting in God's power through God's justification (Rom 4:5)

Trusting in God's power through God's grace (2 Cor 12:9-11)

Trusting in God's power that works within us (Eph 3:20)

Trusting in God's power that shields us (1 Peter 1:5)

FAITH AND DUTY (LUKE 17:7-10)

Faith desires assigned duties (7-8)

Desiring duties through hardships (2 Tim 4:5)

Desiring duties voluntarily (1 Cor 9:17)

Desiring duties by offering ourselves as living sacrifices (Rom 12:1)

Faith knows our competence comes from God (9)

Competence can only come from God (2 Cor 3:5)

Competence because of God working in us (Phil 2:13)

Competence using God's strength (Phil 4:13)

Faith promotes humble service (10)

Humble service doing the work of the Lord (1 Cor 15:58)

Humble service doing what God has assigned (Heb 6:10)

Humble service doing God's will (Heb 10:36)

Humble service doing good works (Eph 2:10)

CONCLUSION AND OTHER THOUGHTS

COMMENTARY THOUGHTS FROM BOB DEFFINBAUGH

A Plea For Faith and a Puzzling Response (17:5-10)

Introduction

Overview and Key Verse of the Lesson

The lesson helps us realize that our confidence in God should result in **Increasing Faith** as we mature as Christians. The **study's aim** is to understand that we increase in faith as we put total confidence in God's promises. The **study's application** is to increase our confidence in God in areas where we harbor doubts. *(Adapted from the Bible Expositor and Illuminator Commentary)*

Key Verse: Luke 17:5

And the apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith."

Commentary from The Bible Knowledge Commentary

Jesus taught about the obligations **His disciples** had toward other people (vv. 1-4) and God (vv. 6-10). Followers of Jesus are not to **cause people to sin**. In this life sin cannot be eradicated—such things **are bound to come**. **But** a disciple would be better off drowned by **a millstone** (a heavy stone for grinding grain) **tied around his neck, than** to bring spiritual harm (*skandalisē*, “to cause to sin”) to **these little ones** (people who, like little children, are helpless before God; cf. 10:21; Mark 10:24). Presumably the sinning referred to is lack of faith in the Messiah. Jesus had already noted that the Pharisees were not only refusing to enter the kingdom but were also keeping others from entering (Luke 11:52). Not only are Jesus' followers not to cause others to sin; they also are to counteract sin by forgiving others (17:3-4). One should **rebuke a brother** if he **sins**. **If he repents**, he is to be forgiven even if he **sins** and repents over and over. The words **seven times in a day** denote a completeness—as often as it happens. Jesus also taught that His followers have responsibilities toward God. The first responsibility is to **have faith**. When the disciples asked Jesus for more **faith**, He answered that they needed not more faith but the right kind of faith. Even the smallest amount of faith (like **a mustard seed**, the smallest seed; cf. 13:19) could do amazingly miraculous things, such as uprooting a **mulberry tree**, a tree with deep roots (17:6). The disciples' second responsibility toward God was humble service (vv. 7-10). They should not expect special praise for doing things they were expected to do. **A servant** does not get special praise from his master for doing his job. Likewise disciples have certain responsibilities which they are to fulfill in humility as God's **unworthy** (*achreioi*, “good for nothing,” used elsewhere only in Matt. 25:30) **servants**.

Lesson Introduction and Background

From the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary

Have you ever wanted to “get even” with someone? If we are offended or mistreated, we may believe we have a right to retaliate, thus evening the score. There is a sense of entitlement here, a belief that bad behavior toward us gives us a right to pay back. Of course, if we really want to stand up for ourselves, our response will be a little greater, thereby “teaching a lesson” to our tormentor. We don't just get even; we must win. Lest we think the above is simply the schoolyard attitude of childhood, we should look at what happens in many workplaces. Petty grudges are held for years. Certain coworkers are feared or loathed because they will let no offense, no matter how tiny or unintentional, go by without a negative reaction. Such behavior can be found all the more in the online world of social media, where face-to-face behavioral etiquette doesn't seem to apply. At the core of all this is the belief that life should be fair and that we are both (1) the judges of what is fair treatment and (2) enforcers of punishment on those who step over the lines—our lines. We think ourselves to be justified in keeping behavioral scorecards in our relationships. Such score keeping can be found in extended families, marriages, and churches. It should not be. In this lesson, Jesus addresses the dynamics of relationship offenses. His solid, practical principles that applied to his disciples in the first century AD are vital yet today. These begin

with an understanding of our place in the arena of relationships. This helps us see ourselves as people of faith whose service to God is far more important than keeping score with other people.

In Luke 17, Jesus was on his final journey to Jerusalem and the cross that awaited him there. The trip narrative begins in Luke 9:51 and ends with the triumphal entry in chapter 19. Many teaching opportunities are recorded in this section of 10-plus chapters. Sometimes Jesus was teaching the crowds, sometimes just his 12 disciples. Today's lesson falls in the second category. This lesson focuses on the topics of forgiveness and faith. Forgiveness in particular was a much studied and discussed issue for the Jewish people of Jesus' day. Their Scriptures (our Old Testament) taught them about the necessity of asking and receiving God's forgiveness (see Psalms 32:1, 2; 79:9). The Scriptures also spoke to forgiveness between people, seen as both necessary and wise (see Proverbs 17:9). The Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur) was a national holy day that addressed the forgiveness of the people for another year as the high priest offered the specified sacrifices (Leviticus 16). Yet just as the relationship of the people to the Lord had been complicated by many rituals and regulations, so too had the process of forgiving others. Rather than letting forgiveness occur naturally as a loving act between people, some wanted to define its terms and limit its frequency. Thus, the act of grace that forgiveness was to represent had become something much less gracious: a response to certain criteria (conditions) that had to be met. In short, forgiveness for the Jews of Jesus' day had to be earned. Jesus taught that a world without forgiveness was a cruel and cold place. By the time of today's lesson, he had taught his disciples to pray for forgiveness from God as they forgave others (Matthew 6:12, 14, 15). But there was more yet for them to learn on this topic.

Major Theme Analysis

(Scriptural Text from the New King James Version; cross-references from the NIV)

Faith and Forgiveness (Luke 17:1-4)

- 1 Then He said to the disciples, "It is impossible that no offenses should come, but woe to him through whom they do come!
- 2 It would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were thrown into the sea, than that he should offend one of these little ones.
- 3 Take heed to yourselves. If your brother sins against you, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him.
- 4 And if he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times in a day returns to you, saying, 'I repent,' you shall forgive him."

Faith does not keep us from sin (1)

Does not keep us from sin because all have sinned (Rom 3:23)

23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,

Does not keep us from sin because no one is righteous (Eccl 7:20)

20 There is not a righteous man on earth who does what is right and never sins.

Does not keep us from sin because we cannot claim to be without sin (1 John 1:8-10)

8 If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. 9 If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. 10 If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives.

Faith does not remove consequences of sin (2)

Because the consequence of sin is death (Rom 6:23)

23 For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Because the consequence of disobedience is punishment (Heb 2:2)

2 For if the message spoken by angels was binding, and every violation and disobedience received its just punishment,

Because of the consequence of God's discipline (Heb 12:6)

6 because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son."

Faith promotes forgiving one another (3)

Forgiving grievances (Col 3:13)

13 Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.

Forgiving using kindness and compassion (Eph 4:32)

32 Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.

Forgiving offences (Prov 19:11)

11 A man's wisdom gives him patience; it is to his glory to overlook an offense.

Faith requires no limit to forgiveness (4)

No limits because of love (1 Cor 13:4-8)

4 Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. 5 It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. 6 Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. 7 It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. 8 Love never fails.

No limits because of wanting to win a brother back (Matt 18:15)

15 "If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over.

No limits because not judging or condemning (Luke 6:37)

37 "Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven.

Faith and Effort (Luke 17:5-6)

5 And the apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith."

6 So the Lord said, "If you have faith as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, 'Be pulled up by the roots and be planted in the sea,' and it would obey you.

Faith comes from God (5)

Faith comes from God in measures (Rom 12:3)

3 For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you.

Faith comes from God through the manifestation of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 12:7-9)

7 Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. 8 To one there is given through the Spirit the message of wisdom, to another the message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit, 9 to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by that one Spirit,

Faith comes from God through maturing toward the fullness of Jesus (Eph 4:13)

13 until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

Faith is trusting in God's power (6)

Trusting in God's power through God's justification (Rom 4:5)

5 However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness.

Trusting in God's power through God's grace (2 Cor 12:9-11)

9 But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. 10 That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

Trusting in God's power that works within us (Eph 3:20)

20 Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us,

Trusting in God's power that shields us (1 Peter 1:5)

5 who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time.

Faith and Duty (Luke 17:7-10)

7 And which of you, having a servant plowing or tending sheep, will say to him when he has come in from the field, 'Come at once and sit down to eat'?

8 But will he not rather say to him, 'Prepare something for my supper, and gird yourself and serve me till I have eaten and drunk, and afterward you will eat and drink'?

9 Does he thank that servant because he did the things that were commanded him? I think not.

10 So likewise you, when you have done all those things which you are commanded, say, 'We are unprofitable servants. We have done what was our duty to do.' "

Faith desires assigned duties (7-8)

Desiring duties through hardships (2 Tim 4:5)

5 But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry.

Desiring duties voluntarily (1 Cor 9:17)

17 If I preach voluntarily, I have a reward; if not voluntarily, I am simply discharging the trust committed to me.

Desiring duties by offering ourselves as living sacrifices (Rom 12:1)

12 Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God — this is your spiritual act of worship.

Faith knows our competence comes from God (9)

Competence can only come from God (2 Cor 3:5)

5 Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God.

Competence because of God working in us (Phil 2:13)

13 for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.

Competence using God's strength (Phil 4:13)

13 I can do everything through him who gives me strength.

Faith promotes humble service (10)

Humble service doing the work of the Lord (1 Cor 15:58)

58 Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.

Humble service doing what God has assigned (Heb 6:10)

10 God is not unjust; he will not forget your work and the love you have shown him as you have helped his people and continue to help them.

Humble service doing God's will (Heb 10:36)

36 You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised.

Humble service doing good works (Eph 2:10)

10 For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

Conclusion and Other Thoughts

Commentary Thoughts from Bob Deffinbaugh

The difficulties which our text presents the student are many. Some scholars, as indicated in the last lesson, have come to despair of their being any connection between the various segments of our chapter, and even question that these segments relate to the surrounding context. I do not question the unity of these segments, that is, that there is a logical argument being developed here. The biggest problem for me is to determine what that argument is. In addition, there are several other nagging questions which spur me on to a more careful consideration of these verses.

First, what is the relationship between the forgiveness which Jesus required above, the faith for which the disciples asked, and the concept of our unworthiness as disciples below? Second, why the change from "disciples" in verse 1 to "apostles" in verse 5? Third, what is the relationship between the Lord's teaching on the unworthy slave (verses 7-10) and the story of the 10 lepers, only of whom returned (verses 11-19)? Fourth, did the nine lepers actually manifest faith? Fifth, was that healing (or salvation) which the one returning leper received different from or greater than that which the other nine received? If so, how, and why?

A Plea For Faith and a Puzzling Response (17:5-10)

And the apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!" And the Lord said, "If you had faith like a mustard seed, you would say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and be planted in the sea'; and it would obey you.

But which of you, having a slave plowing or tending sheep, will say to him when he has come in from the field, 'Come immediately and sit down to eat'? But will he not say to him, 'Prepare something for me to eat, and properly clothe yourself and serve me until I have eaten and drunk; and afterward you will eat and drink'? He does not thank the slave because he did the things which were commanded, does he? So you too, when you do all the things which are commanded you, say, 'We are unworthy slaves; we have done only that which we ought to have done.'"

I understand that this petition for more faith is the direct result of Jesus' commands above pertaining to rebuking wayward brethren and the granting of forgiveness, under circumstances which would be extremely difficult. Note the change, here, from the term disciples (verse 1) to apostles (verse 5). I understand the "disciples" to be that larger group of followers of our Lord, those who truly believed in Him, as contrasted with the unbelieving Pharisees (cf. 8:1-3). The "apostles" on the other hand were the twelve, the smaller group of

disciples. This group was much more informed because Jesus had spoken many things to them which the larger group did not hear (cf. Mark 4:33-34; 9:28; John 2:24-25).

But why are we told that the apostles (plural) petitioned Jesus for greater faith? Often we may not be told who among the apostles spoke. At other times, we are informed as to who the speaker (or spokesman) was. But here we are given the impression that many, if not all, of the apostles spoke, asking for greater faith. I believe that they may all have spoken at once, or perhaps one after the other, but that all (or most) of the disciples spoke because they strongly sensed the need for faith. They thought that in and of themselves they could not do what Jesus had commanded.

For some time I had the impression that this was a very pious petition. How could one be more spiritual than to ask for more faith? This has the same pious look that Solomon's request for wisdom has (cf. 1 Kings 3). I am no longer convinced that this was such a spiritual request. Indeed, I am inclined to view it as a camouflage. I think that the apostles were sincere in their request, but that something must have been wrong with it. It does not seem to me that faith is what was lacking here, but simple obedience. Think this matter through with me as we consider our Lord's puzzling response.

First, Jesus' response, as recorded in verses 6 through 10, has a certain proportion which should be instructive to us. Only one verse, verse 6, is positive in nature, while the next four verses are more negative, that is, they are more corrective in nature, as is indicated by the first word of verse 7, "but." This would suggest, when taken with other facts, that Jesus is not affirming their response as much as He is correcting it.

Second, Jesus seems to be teaching that very little faith is required in order to accomplish incredible things. The apostles' request implies that what Jesus required necessitated great faith, and that their supply was deficient. Thus, they asked Jesus for more faith, assuming that they did not have enough. Jesus' answer was that it took only a very little quantity of faith to achieve much. With the quantity of faith equivalent to that of a mustard seed—a very small seed indeed—they could uproot a tree and transplant it into the sea. Did they then need more faith—really? Jesus' answer seems to question their premise that they had too little faith.

Third, Jesus purposely used an illustration of the power of faith which did not relate directly to forgiveness. When "faith-brokers" today speak to men about exercising faith, they do so with the most "tempting" illustrations, illustrations which incite the gullible listener to action. They tell a person, for example, if you have the faith to send in \$10, God will bless you with \$100. If Jesus wanted His disciples (apostles) to exercise faith, would He not have used an illustration which showed that faith would produce incredible forgiveness? Instead, Jesus taught them that faith in the quantity of a mustard seed would enable them to command a tree to be uprooted and to be transplanted to the sea. Who cares? Who is interested in transplanting trees in this way? Jesus used this illustration to prove His point, but not to motivate them to exercise faith in the area of forgiveness.

A friend of mine pointed out that this request of the apostles is most interesting in the light of the power and authority already granted them by our Lord. They had been sent out to preach the kingdom of God, with the power and authority to heal and to cast out demons (Luke 9:1ff.). In spite of such great power, some of which seems to abide with them on an on-going basis, they found that they did not have sufficient "faith" to forgive. Now this is truly an amazing thing. In the following verses, Jesus is going to sharpen the focus of the apostles, so that what they really lack will become evident. There is a deficiency, I believe, but it is not in the quantity of the apostles' faith.

Fourth, and most significantly, we should note that while the disciples made a very clear request for increased faith, Jesus is not said to have granted it. This is such an obvious fact that we hardly even notice it, and yet it is very crucial to understanding our passage. The disciples asked Jesus for more faith, but Jesus did not grant it. A lack of faith must therefore not be the problem.

Lessons on Gratitude (17:7-19)

In verses 7-19 Luke provides us with two lessons on gratitude. The first lesson is taught by our Lord to the apostles. He compares His relationship to them to the relationship between a master and his slave (verses 7-9). He then applies this to the attitude of His disciples toward their obedience (verse 10). The second lesson comes to us from an incident which happened sometime in the ministry of our Lord, which Luke records at this point because of its contribution to the subject of gratitude. Ten lepers call upon Jesus to have mercy, and all ten are healed, but only one returns to thank the Lord Jesus, and this man is a Samaritan. In the first instance, it is the master who is not obligated to have gratitude towards the obedience of his slave; in the second, it is the recipient of God's grace who is to have gratitude toward God. Let us consider these two lessons on gratitude, and then seek to discover how they relate to faith and forgiveness.

The Hard-Working Slave (17:7-10)

But which of you, having a slave plowing or tending sheep, will say to him when he has come in from the field, ‘Come immediately and sit down to eat’? But will he not say to him, ‘Prepare something for me to eat, and properly clothe yourself and serve me until I have eaten and drunk; and afterward you will eat and drink’? He does not thank the slave because he did the things which were commanded, does he? So you too, when you do all the things which are commanded you, say, ‘We are unworthy slaves; we have done only that which we ought to have done.’”

As was often the case, Jesus began to teach with a story. He speaks from the vantage point of a culture which practices, understands, and to some degree accepts slavery. We will find this lesson very strange indeed, even distasteful. Remember, however, that the slave belonged to his master. He belonged completely to him. Thus, the master could be very severe in his demands, especially in comparison to our culture. Jesus’ words indicate that what He was about to say was something with which all would agree, given that culture. He begins, “Which one of you....” This is very similar to the first two stories Jesus told of “lost things” in chapter 15. There, it was Jesus’ opponents, the Pharisees, who were represented by the “you” (cf. Luke 15:4, 8). He will make His point, then, based upon the attitudes and value systems represented by His apostles.

Any of the apostles would understand the relationship between a master and his slave. None of them, if they had a slave who had either been out all day plowing or tending sheep, would be welcomed home that night with a hot meal. Instead, the master would rightly expect his slave to clean up, change his clothes, and then fix him his meal. Only after this would the slave be free to care for his own needs. And when the slave had perfectly carried out all of his duties for the day, no one would expect the master to come to him, put an arm around his shoulder, and tell him how good a job he had done. Masters felt no obligation to pamper their slaves, nor to praise them.

In our society, our Lord might have told the story of the man who filled out his income tax form. The form was neatly filled out, with all the supporting facts and figures. Along with the form, mailed before April 15th, there was a check for the taxes which were due. Surely, Jesus might say, this man would not expect a call or a thank you note from the IRS or from the President of the United States, expressing the government’s gratitude for obedience to the laws of the land. Paying taxes is our duty, one for which we expect no gratitude if we obey exactly as required, but one which we expect punishment for failing to perform.

Nobody among the apostles would have argued this point with the Master. But why was this true? Why was it granted that the master need not pamper or praise his slave, but expect him to serve him sacrificially and faithfully? I think that there is one principle reason, and it is almost too simple to repeat: because the master was the master, and the slave was a slave. The underlying principle might therefore be summarized: **MASTERS HAVE EVERY RIGHT TO DEMAND COMPLETE OBEDIENCE FROM THEIR SLAVES, BUT SLAVES HAVE NO RIGHT TO DEMAND ANYTHING FROM THEIR MASTERS.**

Put in different terms, **PRAISE AND SERVICE ARE PURELY A MATTER OF POSITION.**

The Lord, in verse 10, puts the principle into very practical terms, applying it to His disciples. It is apparent that the Lord is to be viewed as the Master, and the disciples, His slaves. They, like slaves, are to see themselves as under obligation to obey the Lord completely. Having done so, they are not to expect praise or reward, either. Instead, they are to look upon themselves as “unworthy slaves.”

Our Lord’s words raise two important questions. The first is raised by another text of Scripture; the second, by a very popular contemporary emphasis. This first question is this: **WHY DOES JESUS SPEAK OF HIS DISCIPLES AS SLAVES HERE, WHEN HE SEEMS TO REVERSE THIS IN THE GOSPEL OF JOHN?**

You will recall these words, spoken by our Lord in the 15th chapter of John’s gospel:

“You are My friends, if you do what I command you. No longer do I call you slaves; for the slave does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I have heard from My Father I have made known to you” (John 15:14-15, NASB).

Note, in the first place, that regardless of whether or not one is a “slave” or a “friend,” they must obey in either case. A slave, by his position, must obey; a friend, by Jesus’ definition, must obey, His commands. Obedience is not set aside, but reaffirmed. Second, Jesus is not saying that the role of a slave is set aside altogether, but only that it is set aside in the matter of being informed of what the Master is doing. A slave is not told the master’s plans and purposes, but is only given instructions. A friend, on the other hand, is privy to the purposes of his friend. Jesus is therefore setting aside the role of a slave in this dimension, but not in every dimension. That is why Paul and others can so frequently (and accurately) refer to themselves as the Lord’s slaves (cf. Romans 1:1).

The second question is one that is culturally necessitated: WHY DOES JESUS INSTRUCT HIS DISCIPLES TO THINK OF THEMSELVES AS UNWORTHY SLAVES, WHEN OUR CULTURE IS TELLING US THAT MEN NEED A BETTER SENSE OF THEIR SELF-WORTH?

Frankly, this is a good question. I will leave it to those who advocate a “good self image” to explain. I cannot. Jesus’ words, in my estimation, are too clear to brush aside. It is the Pharisees who had a “good self-image” and were destined for hell. It was those who knew themselves “unworthy” who came to Jesus and found grace and forgiveness.

Our Lord’s words in this text teach us a vitally important principle, which can be summed up in this way: FAITH ALWAYS OPERATES IN THE ARENA OF GRACE AND MERCY, AND IS EXERCISED BY THOSE WHO KNOW THEMSELVES TO BE UNWORTHY.

I believe that Jesus’ words here in verses 6-10 serve as a corrective to the erroneous thinking of the apostles, who asked for greater faith. The important thing, Jesus says, is not the amount of faith, but the attributes of faith. Faith is not here a matter of quantity, but of quality. The disciples’ thinking was that they lacked sufficient faith. Jesus’ answer was that they lacked an accurate understanding of the nature of faith. I believe that Jesus is, in these verses, condemning what we might call Pharisaical faith, a “faith” which is based more upon the possessor of it than its object, a faith which is based more on one’s performance than on God’s character.

Jesus would have us learn that while a master has every right to demand total obedience from his slaves, and the slave has every obligation to obey his master completely, the master has no obligation to be grateful to his slave, even though he obeys him completely. Pharisaical faith becomes a kind of “work” which obligates God to respond. Biblical faith requires obedience to God, without any demands on Him at all. Biblical faith thinks in terms of duty; Pharisaical faith thinks in terms of benefits, obligated by faithfulness.

The Pharisees really believed that by their outward compliance with the Law—that is, their interpretation of it—that they could merit God’s favor. They saw, for example, that their prosperity was the logical and necessary outcome of their piety. Thus, they felt little gratitude toward God, for what they got, they deserved (in their minds). Gratitude, to them, was an obligation which fell more on God, than upon them.

God warned the Israelites of this danger, even before they entered the promised land. In the early chapters of the book of Deuteronomy, God reminded His people of His blessings, all of which were a matter of grace, in spite of their disobedience, grumbling, and all around nastiness. He also warned them that when they entered the promised land they would, once again, partake of the fruits of His grace, but that they would be inclined to credit themselves for these blessings. In other words, Israel would look upon God as obligated to bless them, rather than to be grateful for His grace.

Be careful that you do not forget the Lord your God, failing to observe his commands, his laws and his decrees that I am giving you this day. Otherwise, when you eat and are satisfied, when you build fine houses and settle down, and when your herds and flocks grow large and your silver and gold increase and all you have is multiplied, then your heart will become proud and you will forget the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. He led you through the vast and dreadful desert, that thirsty and waterless land, with its venomous snakes and scorpions. He brought you water out of hard rock. He gave you manna to eat in the desert, something your fathers had never known, to humble and to test you so that in the end it might go well with you. You may say to yourself, “My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me.” But remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth, and so confirms his covenant, which he swore to your forefathers, as it is today. If you ever forget the Lord your God and follow other gods and worship and bow down to them, I testify against you today that you will surely be destroyed. Like the nations the Lord destroyed before you, so you will be destroyed for not obeying the Lord your God (Deuteronomy 8:11-20, NIV).

But what does all this have to do with faith and forgiveness? Everything! First, I believe that Jesus is teaching us that faith always operates in the realm of grace and mercy. If the Pharisees thought that God owed them His blessings, Jesus taught just the opposite. Jesus taught that those who would have faith must first recognize their own unworthiness, and must approach Him on the basis of His grace, not on the basis of our merits.

I decided to track the subject of faith through the gospel of Luke, and learned something very interesting. Faith, in Luke, is closely associated with a sense of unworthiness. The first instance of “faith” which is mentioned in Luke is the healing of the paralytic man, who was lowered through the roof of the house in which Jesus was teaching. Luke tells us that it was upon seeing the faith of the stretcher-bearers that Jesus responded to the paralytic, “Friend, your sins are forgiven you” (Luke 5:20, NASB). Why did Jesus say this, rather than to first heal the man? And why did the man not ask Jesus to be healed? He could speak, we would assume. I think the man felt a deep sense of unworthiness to approach Jesus and to ask for healing. Jesus therefore dealt with that

which hindered the man most—his sin. It was this man’s sin which made him conscious of his unworthiness, and so Jesus first pronounced forgiveness. And then He healed him.

The second instance of faith is much clearer. In Luke chapter 7, we are told of the great faith of the Centurion, who begged Jesus to heal his slave, but not to bother to come to his house. I always viewed the great faith of this man in terms of his request for a “long distance” healing. But I now believe that a part of the greatness of his faith was his awareness of his unworthiness. Faith begins with a knowledge of our unworthiness, and thus appeals to God on the basis of His grace and mercy, rather than on the basis of our merit. Incidentally, Luke (alone) informs us that while this centurion knew he was unworthy, the Jewish elders specifically appealed to Jesus to grant his request because he was worthy (Luke 7:3).

The third instance of faith in Luke is found in the same chapter (7:36-50). Our Lord was eating a meal in the home of one of the Pharisees. During the meal a woman with a tainted reputation came, and from behind the Lord, washed His feet with her tears, kissed them, and anointed them with an expensive perfume—the most costly thing she had. When the host Pharisee saw this, he thought that Jesus must not have known of her past. How could a true prophet allow this woman to touch Him? Jesus contrasted this woman’s hospitality with the reception (or lack of it) He had been given by His host. But the important thing to note in this text is that the woman, by her actions, revealed that she felt utterly unworthy of the Lord. The Pharisees, on the other hand, felt too worthy, but by the treatment they gave the Lord Jesus, did not consider Him worthy of the normal social graces. Jesus sent this woman away with the reassuring words, “Your faith has saved you; go in peace” (7:50).

Why did this woman not ask Jesus for a healing? Why did she try to “steal” it unnoticed? To have pressed her way through that crowd was an incredible feat. She surely could have called out for help and healing, but she did not. I think that the woman’s actions are explained by the fact that she did not wish to draw attention to herself, or to “bother” the Master. It is my opinion that she, like the others, did what she did out of a deep sense of unworthiness. She knew she was unworthy (she was unclean, you will recall), but she also believed that merely a touch of Jesus’ garment would heal her. The next reference to faith is in chapter 12, verse 28, only here it is not the presence of faith, but the lack of it which is stressed. Having little faith, Jesus taught, was the source of worry about food and clothing. This text does not directly bear upon our text. In chapter 17, the portion of Luke with which we are presently concerned, faith is mentioned three times (verses 5, 6, & 19). In the next chapter, we have the story of the self-righteous Pharisee and the tax-gatherer (18:9-14). The verse which immediately precedes this story reads as follows:

“I tell you that He will bring about justice from them speedily. However, when the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on the earth?” (Luke 18:8).

I believe that the story of the self-righteous Pharisee and the penitent sinner has a direct connection to this verse, in which our Lord spoke of finding faith on the earth. I believe that one of the characteristics of faith is a sense of unworthiness on the part of the one who beseeches or approaches God. I believe that unbelief, on the other hand, is betrayed by a sense of self-confidence, which foolishly supposes that one is really worthy of God. In the last part of chapter 18 (verses 35-43) we read of the blind man who persists in calling out to Jesus, pleading for mercy (cf. v. 38). Some who were in the crowd tried to silence him. Obviously, they did not think that he was worthy of the Master’s attention. This man did not think so either, but he did not request justice, but mercy. Only the unworthy petition God for mercy, and that is just what this man did.

The final occurrence of the term “faith” is found in chapter 22 (verse 32). Here, Jesus is speaking to Peter, who, like the Pharisee above, is brimming with self-confidence. When Jesus spoke to Peter about his failure, he assured His Lord that he most certainly would not do so (22:33). Jesus told Peter that while Satan had demanded to “sift him like wheat” (v. 31), He had prayed for him, that his faith would not fail (v. 32). What might cause Peter’s faith to fail? Was his failure to come so great that he might feel so utterly unworthy that he might despair of ever being used of God again. If faith is rooted in a sense of unworthiness, then his faith need not fail, for he was unworthy, but faith looks to God when we really are unworthy. Thus, he faith would not fail, his faith would work in the knowledge of his unworthiness and seek God’s grace.

The use of “faith” in the gospel of Luke (and the other gospels as well, I suspect) leads me to this conclusion: **FAITH FUNCTIONS ONLY THE CONTEXT OF MERCY AND GRACE, AND THUS IT IS EXERCISED ONLY BY THOSE WHO KNOW THEMSELVES TO BE UNWORTHY. FAITH NEVER LOOKS TO GOD TO RESPOND TO US IN GRATITUDE, BUT ALWAYS RESPONDS TO HIM WITH GRATITUDE.**

Consider with me how this conclusion makes sense of our text. Jesus commanded His disciples to forgive those who sin against them, even if that person sins and repents seven times a day. The disciples, like us, are going to wonder whether of not this makes sense. How do we forgive someone who is not worthy of it? Jesus’ answer is as follows. First, if He is the Master and we are His slaves, we are obligated to obey Him fully, whether we understand why or not. His demands are never to great, for He is the Master, and we are His slaves. Second,

while it may take faith to forgive as Jesus has said, it is not just the quantity of it which is the problem, but the quality of it. Faith is that system on which those who are unworthy of God's favor approach him and live for Him. Would we suppose that those who sin against us are unworthy of our forgiveness? Let us not forget that we are unworthy of God's forgiveness, along with all of the rest of His blessings. The forgiveness which we are commanded to show to others is a matter of grace, and is thus unmerited. We who live by grace must also manifest that same grace to others, as God manifests it to us. This is why our Lord stresses the subject of gratitude in these verses. The slave is not to expect gratitude from the master; the slave is to show gratitude toward the master. It is our gratitude, based upon the grace of God in our lives, which is the fuel for the forgiveness which we are to manifest toward others. Thus, Jesus has turned the subject. Faith is an issue here, but it is not the need for more faith on the part of the disciples as it is to remember the basic principles on which faith operates. Faith operates in the realm of grace, and grace should produce gratitude. This gratitude is the disciple's motive for forgiving others. Those who are forgiven much are expected (on the basis of grace) to forgive.

(Adapted from URL:<https://bible.org/seriespage/54-putting-faith-perspective-luke-175-19>)

Concluding Thoughts from the NIV Standard Lesson Commentator

In today's lesson, Jesus confronted the issue of forgiveness in a way that cannot be ignored. He knew that the community of his disciples (the future church) had to be a place of forgiveness and grace. Otherwise, it would be no different from the hard-edged communities of "earned forgiveness" of his day. In that light, Jesus taught his disciples how to forgive and implored them to not place limits on their forgiveness. The model situation is for us to recognize when we are wronged, confront the wrongdoer, receive an apology, and release any grudge or ill feelings. But we know that the process doesn't always work so smoothly! The process breaks down when the one who has wronged us refuses to accept correction and does not repent. The expectation of an apology can make things worse. This holds true on a daily basis, whether at work or at home, whether in a supermarket or in a restaurant. But before we are tempted to set aside Jesus' model as unrealistic for our day, we should flip it around and ask ourselves some questions: How do we react to a deserved rebuke? How do we respond to a fellow Christian who comes to us to register a complaint about our behavior? Is our first impulse one of self-justification (example: 1 Samuel 15:19, 20) or one of self-examination (example: 2 Samuel 12:11-13a)? Do we facilitate the process of forgiveness or do we (stumbling)block it? These questions relate closely to Jesus' teaching on faith in this lesson. Do we expect praise or congratulations for doing the right thing? Must our acts of faithful obedience be rewarded in order for us to continue to do the right thing? Receiving correction in a humble spirit is an act of faith, maybe as difficult an act of faith as there is for a Christian. Humility is not easy, because we do not live in a world that prizes or encourages the humble heart. The worldly model is one of "getting even" for offenses against us. Let's put the scorecards away! Let's have faith much bigger than a tiny mustard seed and allow God to transform our world for him. Mustard seeds and scorecards don't mix.

Practical Points from the Bible Expositor and Illuminator

1. It is a deadly serious thing to be the cause of someone else's fall into sin (Luke 17:1-2)
2. We cannot put any limit on forgiveness; God does not (vss. 3-4)
3. We want more faith; Jesus tells us to live by the faith we have (vss. 5-6)
4. We must not expect to receive our rewards while our tasks on earth are still unfinished (vss. 7-8)
5. We often expect lavish praise and recognition just for doing our minimal duty (vs. 9)
6. Obedience is no cause for self-congratulatory pride (vs. 10)