

“Increase Our Faith!” (Luke 17:1–10)

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I saw an interesting video clip this week.¹ It was of some moments from the national convention held by the Democratic Socialists of America.² The video clip was edited to show a few of the more, well, interesting moments of their meeting in Atlanta. At the meeting, a man in attendance raised his hand, was acknowledged by the moderator, and then approached an open microphone to address the crowd. He began, “Uh, guys, first of all, James Jackson, Sacramento, he/him. I just want to say, can we please keep the chatter to a minimum. I’m one of the people who’s very prone to sensory overload. There’s a lot of whispering and chatter going on. It’s making it very difficult for me to focus. . . . Can we please just keep the chatter to a minimum? It’s affecting my ability to focus. Thank you.” Right when James said, “Guys,” a man in a red dress started to get agitated. He got up to the microphone next and said, with no little amount of passion, “Please do not use gendered language to address everyone.” He obviously was offended that the previous speaker would address everyone as a “guy.” The next scene in this clip was once again of James Jackson, who addressed the crowd a second time, with quite a bit of annoyance audible in the tone of his voice. “I have already asked people to be mindful of the chatter of their comrades who are sensitive to sensory overload, and that goes double for the heckling and hissing. It is also triggering to my anxiety. . . . Your need to express yourself is important but your need to express yourself should not trump . . .” That moment got cut off, but he was apparently trying to say that the need for someone people to make noise shouldn’t trump his need not to hear such noises, which were triggering his anxiety.

The next moment in the video clip featured a speaker from the podium, who encouraged people not to clap but to raise their ends and wiggle their fingers. Because, you know, all that noise was triggering the people who have sensory overload. This leader acknowledged that there were many “disabled comrades” at the convention, and that many of these comrades had “invisible” disabilities, which make it hard for them to “navigate” the space they were in. For example, those people given to sensory overload. To accommodate such disabled comrades, this speaker let the audience know that there were quiet rooms available. He also urged people not to

¹ You can see the video for yourself here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UPLQNUVmq3o>.

² For one take on the convention, see Elliott Kaufman, “Democratic Socialists Sound Like Democrats,” *Wall Street Journal*, August 7, 2019, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/democratic-socialists-sound-like-democrats-11565214408>.

go into those spaces with “anything that’s like an aggressive scent.” After all, he said, “we don’t want to put people in stressful situations that they don’t consent to.”

Now, it would be easy to laugh at these people and call them crazy. Yet I think that video clip reflects something very serious in our society. It seems that the worst thing we can imagine is that we would be offended. Apparently, that is one of the worst crimes—to offend someone without their consent. (I’m not sure how you could offend someone consensually, but perhaps that’s what we pay comedians to do.) Heaven forbid that we be offended.

It also seems that the greatest thing that we could achieve is to realize our dreams, whatever those may be. The greatest thing, it seems, is to satisfy our emotions and desires. Another great good is getting everyone else to accommodate our wishes, to have everyone affirm our project of self-actualization. If I have certain desires, you must affirm them as good and right for me to have, and to act upon. If I want to quit my job and leave my family, who are you to tell me that’s wrong? No, you should cheer me on and tell me to follow my dream.

Yet Jesus says things that contradict the idols of our age. He says that the greatest crime is not to be offended, but rather to offend. The greatest crime is to offend God, to rebel against him, to disregard him, to disobey his commands. And the greatest achievement is not to fulfill our dreams and have everyone else cheer us on as we pursue them. No, the greatest thing is to serve the King of kings, God himself.

We’ve been studying the life of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke. Today, we see another passage that features the teachings of Jesus. He warns his followers about sin and tempting others to sin. They, realizing that the Christian life is difficult, ask Jesus to increase their faith. But Jesus doesn’t say, “Yes, I’ll do that very thing. I’ll give you more faith.” No, he tells them that even a little faith can do great things. But he warns them that they shouldn’t do great things for themselves, or to manipulate God. They should serve God because it is their duty; it is what God expects of all of us.

Today, we’re going to read Luke 17:1–10. We’ll read it in three parts. I’ll start with the first four verses.

¹ And he said to his disciples, “Temptations to sin are sure to come, but woe to the one through whom they come! ² It would be better for him 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. ³ Pay attention to yourselves! If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him, ⁴ and if he sins against you seven times

in the day, and turns to you seven times, saying, ‘I repent,’ you must forgive him.”³

Here, Jesus warns against tempting others to sin. Why? Because sin is a most dangerous, toxic thing. Imagine warning people at a convention not to offend others. Now, amplify that by the order of a million. That’s the danger of sin. Sin is truly the root of all evil. It’s that evil power that’s inside of us, that causes us to do what is wrong. One not-so-orthodox Christian author has called it the “human propensity to f*** things up.”⁴ This author writes this about sin: “It’s our active inclination to break stuff, ‘stuff’ here including moods, promises, relationships we care about, and our own well-being and other people’s, as well as material objects whose high gloss positively seems to invite a big fat scratch.”⁵

Now, you may think, “What’s the big deal? So what? We all screw things up? Who hasn’t?” Well, the reason why this is all a big deal is because the “things” that we foul up are not our own. They are God’s. God is the very center of the universe. He is the goal of the universe. He is the alpha and omega, the beginning and end, and all things are made through him, to him, and for him. So, he has made everything, and therefore everything belongs to him. And that includes human beings. Our propensity to foul things up doesn’t end up in just scratches to cars, cabinets, and computers. We have a tendency to hurt each other. But what is most offensive to God about all of this is that our sin is rebellion against him. We ignore that he is the Creator and Sustainer of all things. We ignore that everything was made by him and for him. We ignore the fact that he is perfectly good, wise, and powerful. We think we can do without him, at least on our good days. Sin is a failure to acknowledge God as God. It’s an attempt to de-god God, usually to put ourselves on his throne.

Sin is corrosive, toxic, and destructive. It’s like a cancer that metastasizes until the whole organism is diseased and beyond hope. Don’t believe me? Look at the news. See stories of mass shootings and sexual abuse. Look at a divided nation, full of people who spew hate and are selfish. Of course, sin isn’t always spectacular. It often takes the more mundane form of thinking solely of oneself, of breaking promises and failing to live up to our own moral codes. Sin can take the subtle form of a bad thought or an impure desire. We don’t have to look farther than the

³ All Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

⁴ Francis Spufford, *Unapologetic: Why, Despite Everything, Christianity Can Still Make Surprising Emotional Sense* (New York: HarperOne, 2013), 27.

⁵ Ibid.

mirror or our own souls to know that sin is real. G. K. Chesterton wrote, over a century ago, “Certain new theologians dispute original sin, which is the only part of Christian theology which can really be proved.”⁶

Sin is so serious that Jesus says three important things about it here. One, he says that in this fallen world full of sin, temptations to sin are inevitable. Until the day when Jesus comes to Earth a second time to bring human history as we know it to an end, there will be sin, and there will be temptations to sin. But that doesn’t mean we should just give in and sin with abandon. So, two, Jesus says that those who tempt others to sin are cursed. It would be better to have a millstone, a giant stone used to grind grain, tied to oneself and then be thrown into the sea than to cause others to sin. Jesus refers to Christians as “little ones.” In other Gospels, it seems he says something like this when referring to children, but here it seems he’s referring more broadly to Christians. At any rate, he’s saying there are worse things than death. Leading others to sin is likely to incur condemnation.

The third thing Jesus says about sin is that we should keep an eye on ourselves and also on our brothers and sisters. Not tempting others to sin isn’t enough. We need to avoid sin ourselves and if we see others sinning, we should warn them and even rebuke them. And if they turn from sinning and seek forgiveness, we must forgive them. The true mark of a Christian is repentance—turning away from sin and back to God—and seeking and giving forgiveness when repentance is present.

The seriousness of sin is at the heart of Christianity and it’s at the heart of the Bible. Just read through any section of the Old Testament and that becomes clear. Read any one of the Gospels, and you can see that. This message must have struck the disciples as quite serious, because when they hear it, they ask Jesus for help. Let’s look at the next couple of verses, verses 5 and 6:

⁵ The apostles said to the Lord, “Increase our faith!” ⁶ And the Lord said, “If you had 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.

The disciples hear what Jesus has to say about the seriousness of sin, and they must be thinking, “We can’t do this without your help. Increase our faith!” That sounds like a good request. In fact, I wouldn’t be surprised if I’ve prayed something like that in the past. But what’s

⁶ Gilbert K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (New York: John Lane Company, 1909), 24.

surprising is that Jesus doesn't say, "Sure, I'll do that. Thanks for asking." Jesus' response is something we wouldn't expect. He doesn't say that they need more faith. Instead, he says that if they had even a small amount of faith, say, the size of a tiny bit of mustard seed, the kind that might be produced by the grinding of a millstone, they would be able to command a mulberry tree to be uprooted and planted in the sea. Now, I don't think anyone would want to plant a tree in the sea, but what's impressive about that feat is the uprooting of a mulberry tree. The black mulberry tree has a very deep and complex root system, one that allows the tree to live up to six hundred years. So, the idea of uprooting it entirely through a command seems impossible.

The idea of planting it into the sea is strange. I wonder if Jesus has something from the Old Testament in mind. At the end of Micah, there's a beautiful passage about God's mercy, grace, and love. This is Micah 7:18–19:

- ¹⁸ Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity
and passing over transgression
for the remnant of his inheritance?
He does not retain his anger forever,
because he delights in steadfast love.
- ¹⁹ He will again have compassion on us;
he will tread our iniquities underfoot.
You will cast all our sins
into the depths of the sea.

If we turn from our sin to Jesus and seek forgiveness, he will uproot our sin—which, like that mulberry tree, is something we couldn't dig up—and cast our sins into the sea. Even a little bit of real faith in Jesus will move our sins into the sea. I don't think Jesus means that if we have faith, we'll have all kinds of superpowers. A careful reading of the Bible never leads to that idea. Jesus' point is not that we'll be superheroes if we have faith. His point is that God does amazing things with a little faith. And, truly, to be forgiven of sin is an amazing thing. So is avoiding sin and helping others to turn from sin back to God.

Perhaps Jesus anticipated that the disciples might take this bit of teaching the wrong way. They might have thought, "Well, we have more than a little faith, so we must be able to do great things!" And the disciples do great things in time. If you read the book of Acts, you see that some of them performed miracles. But Jesus wants them to know that we don't do great things to make ourselves great, or to manipulate God to do our bidding, or to put God in our debt. No, we

do things for God because it is our duty. We see that in the next few verses, which form a short parable. Let's read verses 7–10:

⁷“Will any one of you who has a servant plowing or keeping sheep say to him when he has come in from the field, ‘Come at once and recline at table’? ⁸ Will he not rather say to him, ‘Prepare supper for me, and dress properly, and serve me while I eat and drink, and afterward you will eat and drink’? ⁹ Does he thank the servant because he did what was commanded? ¹⁰ So you also, when you have done all that you were commanded, say, ‘We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty.’”

Jesus is picturing a situation in which there is a master who has a servant, really a slave. In ancient Judaism, Jewish people sometimes sold themselves into slavery when they couldn't pay a debt. They became indentured servants—servants who were to be treated well and who could be freed in time. Still, they were servants. Jesus asks his disciples to imagine that they are masters. If they have a servant who does outside work, such as plowing and keeping sheep, when that servant comes inside, does the master serve the servant? No. Instead, the servant keeps on serving the master. Jesus asks the disciples, “Does the master thank the servant because he did what was commanded?” No. The servant was doing his job. It's like what Bill Belichick told the Patriots: “Do your job.”

Jesus then flips the script. He had told the parable from the perspective of the master. But now Jesus tells his disciples that they aren't masters. No, they are the servants. He says, “When you've done your job, don't look for rewards. Don't think God owes you anything. No, just humbly tell God, ‘We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty.’” Jesus doesn't want his disciples to get big heads. He doesn't want Christians to be like the Pharisee in Luke 18:9–14, the one who goes to the temple and, while praying, basically brags about all the good works he does. No, Christians have work to do, and they should do their jobs without expecting much in return.

The reason why that is so is because Christians have already been given their reward. If you become a Christian, you have already received so much: forgiveness of sins, adoption into God's family, a place in the body of Christ, the great gift of the Holy Spirit, who dwells within you, and the promise of eternal life. If you're a Christian, you have already received a priceless gift, a treasure that cannot possibly be valued. But God doesn't save us so we can sit around doing nothing. He has planned good works for us to do in advance.

The apostle Paul, in his letter to the Ephesians, tells us that Christians receive a right standing with God as a gift. Salvation—including our faith—is a gift from God. That means that we can't possibly boast about any of it. We can't say to God, "Look how much I've done. Now you owe me." We have nothing to boast about. But Paul also says that we have work to do. This is what he writes in Ephesians 2:8–10:

⁸ For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, ⁹ not a result of works, so that no one may boast. ¹⁰ For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

Many people quote verses 8 and 9 and leave off verse 10. But that's wrong. We are saved by grace through faith. Yes. We can't boast about any of that. Absolutely true. We are not saved by good works. We are saved by the work of Jesus. But we are saved for good works. And we should do them humbly, not seeking rewards or applause. We do them for God and for the sake of others, not for ourselves.

Now that we've looked at this passage, what do we do with it? How do we apply these verses to our lives?

First, we should consider the seriousness of sin. Jesus warned his disciples not to tempt others to sin. And he told them to keep an eye not only on themselves, but also on their brothers and sisters in the faith. What that presupposes is that Christianity is lived out in community. We can only come to Christ alone. My faith won't save you. Your parents' faith won't save you. You must have faith in Jesus. You must repent of your sins. But once you become a Christian, you enter into a new family. You are a member of the body of Christ (see 1 Corinthians 12). You're a living stone that is part of the temple that is the church (1 Pet. 2:5). You're part of something larger than yourself. You are not alone. You become your brother's keeper and your sister's keeper.

If we take this seriously, we realize that we can't treat Christianity as some kind of product that we buy for ourselves. So many people seem to treat Christianity that way, as if it's some kind of personal, private thing. So many people treat the church that way. They come and go as they please. They don't actually join a church. They don't think about their experience of church through the eyes of other people of the church.

Part of joining a church is realizing that you need accountability. You consent to come under the authority of the leaders of the church, realizing that you are a sheep who needs a

shepherd. You're a Christian who needs an overseer. You're part of a family and you need an elder. But you also come under the authority of the congregation. They can discipline you. They can correct and rebuke you. But they can also serve you and encourage you and comfort you. And not only that, you realize that the people of the church need all those things from you. You realize that they need your correction. They need your service. They need your encouragement, your love, your presence in their lives. Every local church would be far better off if all Christians realized this. Christianity isn't just you and your private relationship with Jesus, your personal Savior. Jesus isn't a personal Savior. He is the world's only Savior. And he is Lord. He's also the head of the church, and he wants his people to enter into a real community.

So, if you're a Christian, officially join a church and start living in community. I would say this: The more you put into church, the more you'll get out of it. And the more other people will get out of it. If you just show up here for about 70 minutes each week, you'll get a little. Showing up is important. It's no small thing to attend regularly. But if you really want to be part of the life of the church, you'll show up for our other meeting times. You'll come early for our Bible study. You'll hang around after the service and talk. You'll come back Sunday evening, or join us on Wednesday nights for more Bible study and prayer. Or you'll get together with other Christians during the week. Be part of this church in a meaningful way. If you don't know how to do that, talk to me.

Joining a church is one thing we can do to apply this passage to our lives. But we should also note the seriousness of sin. Now, if you're here today and you don't happen to be a Christian, you may wonder what all of this has to do with you. Well, consider the Christian message. Sin is so toxic, so destructive, that we should do everything we can to avoid it. But that's not the whole of the Christian message. If I told you just that, you'd think that Christianity is about trying to be good, about avoiding bad things. That might give you the impression that we get into God's good graces through avoiding sin. But that wouldn't be an accurate impression of Christianity.

The message of Christianity is that sin is so powerful that we cannot clean ourselves up. We can't make ourselves good. We can't heal ourselves of the cancer that is sin. From our perspective, it's an incurable wound. Yet God can heal that wound. God can take that sin from us and cast it into the sea. And he does that through Jesus. Jesus is the Son of God. He's not just a man. He has always existed as the Son of God, yet over two thousand years ago, he added a

second nature to himself. He became a human being. He lived a real life on Earth. He was conceived—though in a miraculous way. He was born. He grew up and learned. He ate and drank and slept. And when he was an adult, he performed miracles to demonstrate who he was and what he came to do. He taught amazing things. He lived a perfect life. Yet though he is the only human being who lived a perfect life, who never fouled things up or had the human propensity do so, he was treated like the worst of criminals. We might say he had a millstone tied around his neck and was tossed into the depths of the sea. But he was tossed into something worse. He was thrown into the heart of darkness that is God’s judgment against sin. He experienced God’s wrath while on the cross. Literally, he experienced hell on Earth. He did that so that all who turn to him in faith could have their sin cast away forever. All who turn from sin and turn in faith to Jesus have their sins removed and receive his righteous standing before God. All of that is a gift. That is what we call grace.

If you’re not a Christian, I urge you to turn to Jesus today. I would love to talk to you personally about what it would look like for you to become a Christian. And if you are a Christian, consider how serious sin is. It is so bad that nothing less than the Son of God had to become a man and die for it. Don’t treat sin lightly. Run from it. Don’t tempt others. And if you see others sinning, help them. Correct them. Don’t be silent. There are several passages in the New Testament that talk about correcting others (Matt. 18:15–20; Gal. 6:1; 1 Thess. 5:14; 2 Thess. 3:14–15; James 5:19–20). Yes, you may offend someone if you correct them. But there are worse things than offending someone else. Their offending God is far worse. And the penalty for offending God without repentance is eternal.

Here’s another thing to consider: We don’t need to ask Jesus to increase our faith. Instead, we need to obey. What matters isn’t the strength of our faith. What matters is the object of our faith. You can’t get a more solid, more powerful, more trustworthy and loving and gracious and wise object of faith than Jesus. He will not fail us. Your faith may waver. It may be mixed with doubt and even selfish motives. But Jesus will not fail. If you have even a little bit of real faith, that will lead to obedience. We don’t need to keep saying, “God, increase our faith.” Instead, we need to act on what we know to be true.

Let me put this another way. Instead of waiting for God to increase our feeling of faith before we obey, we need to obey in order to have an increased feeling of faith. If you’re married, you know how fickle emotions can be over the life of a long relationship. If you’re doing

marriage well, you don't wait around saying, "When my feeling of love for my spouse increases, then I'll treat him or her well." No, if you want to have a greater feeling of love, you treat your spouse in a loving way. You do something kind for your spouse, something you know your spouse will appreciate. When you do that, the feelings of love will follow.

In a similar way, if we want to have a greater experience of faith, we must obey Jesus. Do what he teaches, whether it's the commands he gave us directly or the commands that come through the apostles. When you obey Jesus, you will find that your feeling of faith increases. When you do what he says, you will start to see how right his commands are. You will see that what seemed impossible actually turns out for your good and for the good of others. And your faith will increase. If you want a greater experience of the Christian life, don't keep shopping around for what you think is a better church. Don't think, "If only my church were better, I'd have more faith." Don't wait for God to give you riches or health or a better job or new friends. Don't sit around and wait for feelings. Follow Jesus. And then you will find your experience of faith will be better.

But when you obey Jesus, don't start to think that you're great. Don't boast. Don't brag about your good works. And don't think God owes you, as if you're entitled to an easy life, a smooth ride without pain and suffering. Being faithful may mean that your life becomes harder. We don't do good works for our own glory. We do good works for God's glory, and for the good of our brothers and sisters in Christ. And when we do good works, we can humbly say, "We are unworthy servants, saved only by God's grace. We have done our job for the King, for the Master, and that is a reward in itself."