

Luke 17:1-10

Pentecost 20; October 27 & 28, 2019

What is the most difficult thing you have ever done? For me, one of the most difficult tasks, that I did some years ago, was to be the one who called my Father in law to tell him that his oldest daughter was dying. She had been fighting cancer and she was losing the fight. I made the call only a few days after my mother in law died. I'll bet if we went around the room this morning we would hear some that you have all done some incredibly difficult things. For some it might have been a physical task like training for a marathon. For others it might have been a mental task like preparing for a test or writing a paper. Perhaps it was accomplishing one of those *do or die* presentations at work. Perhaps it was a task with an impossible time table. Maybe it was trying to repair a marriage after trust had been broken by one spouse or the other. For others, it might be trying to move forward in life after the death of a loved one. It is safe to say that we have all faced some impossible tasks. This morning, Jesus lays out a couple of tasks that are impossible for us to do. We might even ask ourselves – *Why would Jesus give us such impossible tasks?* Let us take a look at our text and find the answers to that question.

What does Jesus expect us to do as believers? The answer to that question is found in the last verses of our text. When a servant is given a task, he is expected to do because he is a servant. That's the point that Jesus is making by telling this short parable at the end of our text. So, what does Jesus expect us to do? He expects us to be a servant and do our duty.

The first task that Jesus expects us to do is this: Don't cause people to sin. **"Things that cause people to stumble are bound to come, but woe to anyone through whom they come. It would be better for them to be thrown into the sea with a millstone tied around their neck than to cause one of these little ones to stumble. So watch yourselves."** We live in a sinful world. Sins surround us all day long. But Jesus warns us against causing people to sin. This past week, I heard an interesting comment by Martin Luther about temptation. *You can't keep the birds from flying over your head; but you can keep them from nesting in your hair.* Temptation are always around us. Don't be the one that causes others to sin. He is serious about giving us that task. Jesus says: *If you do, it would be better for you if a millstone would be put around your neck and thrown into the sea.* Jesus isn't just talking about kids when he says **"little ones,"** he's also talking about those who have little faith or no faith at all. He warns us to be careful with the words we speak and actions we do so that we don't drive someone away from Jesus. It is so easy for us to do that. For example, our children and our grandchildren learn from us. That's not the question. The question is what are they learning? Are they learning to treasure Jesus? Or are they learning something else? Again, this isn't just about kids. The same thing happens to adults. So, Jesus gives us the task: **"so watch yourselves."**

Another task that he gives us. **"If your brother or sister sins against you, rebuke them; and if they repent, forgive them. Even if they sin against you seven times in a day and seven times come back to you saying 'I repent,' you must forgive them."** Jesus is not saying that the daily limit of forgiving someone is 7 times. On the 8th time, you are in trouble. Often the Bible using the number 7 as a number to show completeness. In other words, Jesus says that we are to forgive an unlimited number of times. We keep forgiving someone. All too often our forgiveness has limits. We don't want to forgive and forget. It is difficult to forgive other sinners every single time they repent! When we are hurt, we want to hurt back.

If God limited the number of times that he forgave us, we would be in trouble. Forgiveness has no strings attached. In Psalm 130, God tells us: **"If you, Lord, kept a record of sins, Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness, so that we can, with reverence, serve you."** Yet, we like to attach strings to forgiveness. For example, we'll forgive others only when that forgiveness benefits us. Forgiveness becomes a weapon to use against someone. Forgiveness becomes conditional hinging on some human action. *If I do this, then God will do that. If my offender does this, then I will do that.* We make forgiveness our decision, when it is God's. Here is another way that we make forgiveness conditional. *God has forgiven you. Now you need to forgive yourself.* Maybe you have even said those words. They sound good. Yet, think what they are saying. *God has done his part; now it's up to me to do mine.* Yet, listen to how Jesus also talks about forgiveness: **"For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. 15 But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins."** (Mt. 6:14-15)

This forgiveness thing is hard. We don't want to forgive without limits and without conditions. We are unwilling to let God be God. If there is forgiveness to be done, we want to earn it, grant it to others, and self-give it. We need to take forgiveness entirely out of our hands and place it in the hands of the Savior whose scars tell the story of unconditional love. Paul says it in the book of Romans: **"But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."** (Rom. 5:8) To look at forgiveness this way seems to be an impossible task.

When the disciples heard Jesus' words and saw the tasks that he was giving them as servants, they knew it was impossible. They knew that the only way that they could do this was through faith. So what do they do? **"The apostles said to the Lord, 'Increase our faith!'"** How does Jesus respond? **"He replied, 'If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it will obey you."** Is Jesus telling his disciples that they had better be praying for an increase in faith? Is he condemning their lack of faith? No. He wants to strengthen their faith. He wants them to see that even if you have a little faith, you can do big things. Not because of the person possessing the faith. But because of the one who gives faith.

The strength of faith comes from God. He wants them to take the spotlight off of themselves and put it on Jesus. That's Jesus' whole point in this section. The tasks that he was asking them to do as servants were impossible for them to do by themselves. What is impossible for us to do is possible for God. It's impossible for us to not cause someone else to sin. It is impossible for us to forgive with no strings attached. It is only possible through Jesus. The source of their strength would come through Jesus. That truth changes everything for us. It changes how we act towards people. It changes the words we speak. It changes how we forgive others. It changes everything. It changes every task that he asks us to do as his servants. May God help each of us to say these words of Jesus: **"We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty."** Amen.