

How can we be proactive in building our relationship with God? This is a universal, felt need in the human family. All of the world's religions try to answer this question. This morning we're going to talk about the one and only way a person can grow their relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

OPENING PRAYER

READ Luke 17:1-10

Jesus 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." 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.

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.'"

In the Gospel, Jesus talked about our relationship with God using three metaphors or images: the "millstone," the "mustard seed," and the "servant." Let's begin with the simplest metaphor, the "millstone." Jesus said, **Luke 17:1-2: 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.**

Take note: Jesus' judgment here is not on the sinner but on the person who causes other people to sin! That's what he means when he says, **"woe to the one through whom they (the sins) come!"**

Jesus's mission was and is to save people from death, to rescue them from the devil, to bring people into the embrace of their Father in Heaven. This is God's solution for all of our problems. I want to be a part of this solution. Do you? Of course you do. That's why you're here today. We don't want to tear people away from God by encouraging sinful behavior, but we want to encourage people in their walk with God. So how do we do that? We begin with ourselves. That's what the next two metaphors are about.

First, there's the "mustard seed." Jesus said, **Luke 17:3-6, 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.**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.

We've probably heard about "**mustard seed**" faith countless times. Unfortunately, it's usually used out of context, taught without any understanding about why one should nourish their faith like a mustard seed.

Let's consider the Scripture again: Jesus said, "**If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him.**" And then the twelve disciples said, "**Increase our faith!**" And THEN Jesus taught the disciples about mustard seed faith.

The context of mustard seed faith is Jesus' teaching about how we must forgive one another for our sins.

The disciples knew they did not have it in their hearts to forgive other people. Thus their emphatic plea, "**Increase our faith!**"

How often I have spoken to folks who struggle with forgiving others who've sinned against them. Whether it's the condescending attitude or public humiliation, theft or betrayal or lies, we often find it very hard to forgive the guilty party. After all, it's one of the most perverse pleasures of man to hold a grudge, isn't it?

But holding a grudge is like a cancer cell, a cancer that metastasizes in our hearts and steals away our joy and eventually kills our spirit.

The mustard seed is a great image for us concerning faith, for it is the tiniest of seeds, and yet it may grow into the greatest of trees. So too our faith begins very small, even as small as the faith planted in the heart of an infant at his or her baptism.

But just as a mustard seed needs to be nourished in order to grow into a tree, so too does our faith need to be nourished in order to be big enough to forgive other people for their sins against me.

This is why we come to church. Here we're fed with God's Word, Living Water, the Bread of Life, Christ's body, Christ's blood that our hearts may become a wellspring of living water for the people among whom we live and work.

This is why we go to Bible study, that we may learn what God's will is that our lives may be enveloped by it.

And thus our faith—a faith that begins as something so small it's barely recognizable as faith—may grow so large that it's able to withstand the storms of this life.

Jesus never wanted us to think about mustard seed faith like something we would use to literally uproot a “**mulberry tree**” to cast into the ocean! He used this imagery that the disciples might imagine the power of a mature faith in their own lives for their work in the spiritual realm, especially as regards their relationships with each other, especially as regards forgiveness. After all, a world filled with people who can forgive one another will be far more interesting than an ocean full of mulberry trees!

The other metaphor Jesus provided to help us understand our relationship with God was that of the “servant.” He said, **Luke 17:7-10, 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 wants us to understand that all of God's children are his servants in the best sense of the word, that to be God's servant is our most healthy and natural state. But, alas, whether it's for our own good or not, we detest the idea of being anyone's servant, even God's! Remember our first parents, Adam and Eve, rejected the idea they were under God. For the Scripture reads they desired to be like God, to be his equals.

But I like the idea of being a servant of God for a couple of reasons. For one thing, if I'm God's servant, this means I don't have to figure everything out. God does all the heavy lifting, and I just follow his orders. Did you ever see Bruce Almighty with Jim Carey, Morgan Freeman, and Jennifer Aniston? Bruce got to be god for a week, but he was not

up to the task, even as he tried to keep track of billions of prayer requests with Post-it Notes! It's a lot easier to follow orders from God than to try to be God.

The second reason it's good to be a servant of God is because the Lord has taken personal responsibility for preserving my life. That's what the one in charge does. He provides everything his servants need to serve him.

I'm so thankful to God for all of His gifts. He's given us homes and families, work and school, friends and teachers, cars, bikes, shopping malls, and amusement parks. And He's given us a great country.

And God gave us Jesus who took away our shame by forgiving our sins, and He's renewed our hearts, and He's set us on a course to build one another up through faith, a faith that can forgive, a faith that can love, a faith that can make the body whole.

Friends in Christ, today and through this week let's consider our lives in Christ with the images he has provided. First, there's the millstone, a metaphor that reminds us that God's judgment is severe against those who cause others to sin.

Second, there's the mustard seed, a symbol for how our faith begins small and yet grows and grows as God nourishes it. Our responsibility is to receive everything God has given us to nourish our faith with thankfulness.

And finally there's the servant: God's in charge. He does all the heavy lifting. We don't have to figure everything out in order to be secure. The Lord watches over you. He comes to us through his Word, and he shows us the Way.

My brothers and sisters, this week may your hearts grow in faith as you receive with thankfulness all the gifts God has given you.

This week may your words and deeds be shaped with an understanding of how important forgiveness is for your relationship with each other and with God himself.

And this week may you have the opportunity to share this Good News with another person who really needs to hear it, in the name of Jesus. Amen.