

Sermon

October 5, 2025

Luke 17:1-10

Pastor Bright is on vacation this Sunday, so this sermon is provided compliments of the Lutheran Church in Canada.

“A Worthy Faith For Unworthy Servants”

“When you have done all that you were commanded, say, ‘We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty.’” These words of Jesus in today’s Gospel Reading are hard words, are they not? Tough words; uncomfortable words. After all, none of us wants to be unworthy. In fact, in this world and in this life we strive awfully hard to be worthy—to be worthy of our spouse’s love . . . to be worthy of our parent’s pride . . . to be worthy of our co-worker’s admiration . . . to be worthy of our boss’ praise . . . to be worthy of a friend’s trust . . . to be worthy of our children’s respect and esteem . . . to be worthy of our coach’s confidence. And that’s hard enough! That’s a full time job—trying to live up to everyone’s expectations, and do all that we have to do in order to be worth something in their eyes.

And it’s not a pleasant thing to then hear that before God we are unworthy. In fact, that’s the best that we can even do! For, when all is said and done, to use the words of Isaiah, *“even our good deeds are like filthy rags.”* And even if we could do all that we are commanded to do, we can only say: *“We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.”*

And what exactly is our duty? What is your duty? What is it that God commands us and expects of us? Is it not this? *“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And love your neighbor as yourself.”* And not just some of the time, not even most of the time; but all of the time. Yes, to follow God’s will in your daily life, not your own will; to walk according to God’s ways, not your ways. Or, to use Jesus’ words here in today’s Gospel—it is not causing others to sin by your actions, nor encouraging or condoning their sin by your silence. It is forgiving them when they sin against you, no matter how many times they sin against you; and not only letting go of that sin, but even repaying them with good. It is serving in whatever station in life God has placed you, and doing so gladly and joyfully, not begrudgingly.

The catechism puts it like this: “Consider your place in life according to the Ten Commandments: Are you a father, mother, son, daughter, husband, wife, or worker? Have you been disobedient, unfaithful, or lazy? Have you been hot-tempered, rude,

or quarrelsome? Have you hurt someone by your words or deeds? Have you stolen, been negligent, wasted anything, or done any harm?"

And if we truly consider our place in life according to the Ten Commandments in this way, we can only say, *"We are unworthy servants; we haven't even done our duty."* No, not even close. And is not that precisely what we confess and admit about ourselves at the beginning of the Divine Service? *"We have sinned against You, O God, in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done and by what we have left undone. We have not loved You with our whole heart; we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves."*

No wonder that the apostles respond as they do to these hard words of Jesus! *"Lord, increase our faith!"* After all, they (and we!) need something—something to help us do what we are not able to do . . . something that will enable us to do our duty . . . something that will make us worthy in the sight of God. And maybe you have found yourself praying that same prayer: *"Lord, increase my faith!"*

But notice how Jesus responds to this request of the disciples—not by granting their request, but, rather, by pointing to the great power of even a small faith. *"If you had faith like a grain of mustard seed,"* He tells them, *"you could say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it would obey you."*

And when we hear these words of Jesus we immediately think: *"What I need is a stronger faith."* And so, we try harder. We might pray a little more fervently, at least for a while. We begin to read our Bible a little more regularly, at least for a time. We attend religious workshops and rallies and seminars, perhaps even go on some religious pilgrimage to the Holy Land or the land of Luther.

But eventually comes the realization that in spite of doing all these things, we really haven't improved at all. We still do not do all that God requires of us. We still have not done our duty. We still do not forgive others as we should. We still cause others to sin by our words and actions. And when this fact hits home, we realize our unworthiness even more so than before; and, as a result, can so easily despair and just forget the whole thing. Which, in fact, is what has happened to many a person. Kind of like what Jesus talks about in His parable of the sower, of the Word that is sown on rocky ground and of which He says: *"This is the one who hears the Word and immediately receives it with joy, yet he has no root, but endures for a while, and when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the Word, immediately he falls away."*

It is highly important, therefore, that we understand what Jesus is really saying here; for the answer to our unworthiness and not doing our duty is not (let me repeat, is not!) the size of our faith. Rather, the problem is who or what we have faith in. After all, you can have a faith that is like a 5,000-watt light bulb; but if you are plugged into an outlet that doesn't work, it really doesn't matter how great your faith is. On the other hand, if your faith is only like a little 15-watt light bulb; as long as you are plugged into the right outlet, it is still going to light up the room. No, not a weak faith versus a strong faith. That's not the real problem; but, rather, a misplaced faith, a faith in ourselves, a faith in our faith. And the answer is not to change to a more powerful light bulb. The answer is to switch outlets—to quit looking to and relying on yourself and your efforts for your worthiness. That is what the apostle Paul is getting at in the Epistle Reading where he says: *"I know whom I have believed, and I am convinced that He is able to guard until that Day what has been entrusted to me."*

And that is why, when we come here to this place of worship, we sit facing the chancel; for our focus is not on ourselves. And as you sit here in this place, what do you see? You see the font, where instead of drowning us unworthy servants in the depth of the sea, our Lord drowns us in Holy Baptism, making us unworthy servants worthy through the forgiveness of our sins. You see the altar, where instead of demanding our service and our sacrifice, our Lord comes and serves us with the sacrifice of His own Body and Blood for the forgiveness of our sins, life, and salvation. You see the pulpit from where is proclaimed not ten principles that you must follow to have a successful life, not seven spiritual laws that you must obey in order to make you worthy in the sight of God; but, rather, to again use St. Paul's words in the Epistle Reading, *"the pattern of sound words in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus, the Gospel of our Savior Jesus Christ who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light."* You see the tree of the cross, where instead of looking to uprooted mulberry trees planted in the sea for evidence of how strong your faith is; you see the One who made the mulberry trees and the sea in the first place, the One who was hurled into the depth of our sin and into death in our place.

Yes, in Jesus and nowhere else—not even in our obedience to Jesus, or our commitment to and service in Christ's Church—that alone is where our faith is directed and must be directed; after all, only in Him do we have a worthiness that avails before God.

And here, you see, is not the place of millstones which drag us down—"do this, don't do that"; but of the Cornerstone, Jesus Christ, *"chosen and precious,"* which lifts us up that *"whoever believes in Him will not be put to shame."* Here is the place of the Son of God who became a worthy servant, doing His duty—the duty of giving His life

as a ransom for many, in order that we unworthy servants who do not do our duty might become sons and daughters of God. Here is the place, not where we earn something because of our dutiful obedience, but where we receive something as a pure gift—simply and only by faith in Jesus. So St. Paul again puts it in the Epistle Reading: *“God saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which He gave us in Christ Jesus.”*

And that is why a faith that is even as small as a grain of a mustard seed is still a strong faith; for the life and strength that we receive through such a faith—no matter how shaky and trembling and simple and small such faith might be—is none other than the very life and strength of Jesus Himself. And which is why the prophet Habakkuk thus declares in the Old Testament Reading: *“The righteous shall live by faith.”*

Now, when we hear this phrase—*“unworthy servants,”* we tend to focus on that ‘unworthy’ part and so try to make ourselves worthy servants; which, however, is impossible for us so to do. Instead, I would have you focus not so much on what you do as on who you are. That in Christ, through faith in Him, you are no longer an unworthy servant, because you are no longer a servant at all! But, rather, a son, a daughter of God, a member of His family. So St. John writes in his Gospel: *“To all who received Him, who believed in His name, He gave the right to become children of God.”*

And you now do what you do simply because of who you are. You do not become who you are by what you do. You show your love to others, because that’s who you are—a son, a daughter who is loved by God. You forgive others, because that’s who you are—a forgiven child of God. No, not unworthy servants trying in vain to do your duty; but, rather, worthy sons and daughters of God—worthy because, as St. Paul puts it in Galatians, *“in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God through faith in Him.”* Amen.

The peace of God guard your hearts and minds as you believe and trust in Him.

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