

Oh, For a Faith that Will Not Shrink

Jesus said to his disciples: "Things that cause people to sin are bound to come, but woe to that person through whom they come. It would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a millstone tied around his neck than for him to cause one of these little ones to sin. So watch yourselves.

"If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him. If he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times comes back to you and says, 'I repent,' forgive him."

The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!"

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.

"Suppose one of you had a servant plowing or looking after the sheep. Would he say to the servant when he comes in from the field, 'Come along now and sit down to eat'? Would he not rather say, 'Prepare my supper, get yourself ready and wait on me while I eat and drink; after that you may eat and drink'? Would he thank the servant because he did what he was told to do? So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.'"

Let's say I asked you to do something difficult. I asked you to move this altar down to the basement. I explain that we have no dollies or special equipment; the elevator is too small; and don't drag it because you might tear up the carpet. You go over to the altar and try lifting up one end and you say, "I can't do this by myself. I need help." Now you understand how the disciples felt in our reading from Luke. Jesus asked his disciples to do some difficult things, and they immediately told Jesus they need help. **"Increase our faith,"** is what they said. But we will learn that they already had the faith to do this difficult thing. We all want a bigger faith, but Jesus is teaching us we already had enough faith. We will use our sermon hymn as our theme and learn to ask God for a faith that will not shrink before difficult things. First, we ask him for a faith that will not shrink from doing the right thing.

I. Oh, for a faith that will not shrink to do what's right.

Jesus asked his disciples to do three difficult things. The first is to make sure we don't cause anyone to sin by our example. **"Things that cause people to sin are bound to come, but woe to that person through whom they come. It would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a millstone tied around his neck than for him to cause one of these little ones to sin. SO WATCH YOURSELVES"** It is bad enough that the devil is tempting everyone many times a day to sin. It would be sad if we helped him by encouraging others to sin. This makes us think of that kid on the playground urging you to call someone names or that boss who tells you to lie to cover up his fraud.

But it is more than that. What are we teaching our children if we go around the house complaining about work? What are we teaching them about the importance of God and his Word if we come to church three times a year? What are we teaching people who know we are Christian and yet we share gossip? Jesus tells us to guard ourselves. It would be better to be drowned in the sea with a large stone tied around our necks than to do such a thing.

The second difficult thing is to rebuke sin. **"If your brother sins, rebuke him."** The word for rebuke here means "honor" or to give someone what they deserve. If the Washington Nationals go on to win the World Series, they should be honored as the best baseball team in 2019. Likewise, a criminal should be honored with jail time for his crimes. He who sins should be honored with a rebuke of his sins.

But why rebuke a sinner for his sins? This leads us to our third difficult thing: so that we can forgive him. **"... if he repents, forgive him. If he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times comes back to you and says, 'I repent,' forgive him."** God does it and he wants us to do it, too, to rebuke sin so people realize it is a sin and repent. And why lead them to repentance? So we can forgive the sin. This is a difficult thing to do. Either we want to rebuke someone, not to lead to repentance, but to put them down and make ourselves look better. It is also hard to rebuke people to us of sin. We are afraid of anger or a division. We know it hurts. Even constructive criticism hurts. And it is hard to forgive. It is easier to hold a grudge. That is why we bring things up from ten years ago. We can't let go of it. Now imagine if someone sinned against you seven times in one day? Maybe you would be willing to forgive him once or twice, but after that forget it.

All these things are difficult. That is why the disciples cried out, **"Increase our faith!"** I find their prayer interesting. They had it right. We need faith to do these and all the other difficult things God asks of us. But they didn't need a stronger faith. They just needed to use the faith they had. Listen to Jesus' response. **"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."** Try measuring faith in kernels of corn. It may only take one or two kernels to believe God will give you your next meal. How many buckets will it take to believe that your uncle's cancer will be used by God for his good? That's how we think. We think we need greater faith to believe or do hard things, but that isn't how God thinks. Mustard seeds are extremely small, but even the smallest faith is capable of the impossible.

Look at the examples of great faith in the Scriptures. All Abraham had was God's promise that he would have a son. It was twenty-five years before God answered his promise. Abraham's faith was great not because he had buckets of it. Remember he had his doubts. But his faith was great because whatever faith he had clung to the Word of God. Peter's faith was not all that great when Jesus told him to cast his net for a catch. He came up with all sorts of excuses why it wouldn't work. Yet, his little faith listened and he caught more fish than his boat could hold.

The truth is, will never reach 100% faith in this world because of sin and our sinful natures. Of course, we don't want to settle with a small faith. We want a growing faith. But even if our faith is small, we are capable of great things. Though it is good we pray for a greater faith, it is just as important that we pray to God to use the faith we have, great or small, to trust him.

So ask God for a faith that will not shrink to do anything God asks. But don't forget to ask him for a faith that does these things for the right reasons.

II. Oh for a faith that will not shrink for doing what's right for the right reasons.

"Suppose one of you had a servant plowing or looking after the sheep. Would he say to the servant when he comes in from the field, 'Come along now and sit down to eat?' Would he not rather say, 'Prepare my supper, get yourself ready and wait on my while I eat and drink; after that you may eat and drink?' Would he thank the servant because he did what he was told to do? So you also, when you have done everything you were told do, should say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.'"

Let's say we do some of the things God asks. We honor our parents. We pay our taxes without hesitation. We guard our behavior so as to promote godly living to our children. We defend another's reputation, and protect his property; we help the poor; we increase our offerings to church or preach a sermon that really struck home. What do we want? Medals? Jesus tells us to stop looking for medals or even a thank you when we do what he says. This sounds cold at first. We parents know how far a little compliment goes. If a kid actually did what we said and cleaned his room, we pat him on the back for it. Jesus isn't discouraging that here. He is making a greater point and helping us understand why we do anything he asks.

He is telling us that we do these things not for a reward, not even for a thank you. We do them because the reward has already been given to us. Paul started off his second letter to Timothy by reminding him of the reward God already gives us. ***"... join with me in suffering for the gospel, by the power of God, who has saved us and called us to a holy life—not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time, but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior, Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel."*** Even before creation, God already showered us with his grace and promised us that our sins would be forgiven, that nothing including our guilty would withhold us from heaven, that we will spend eternity with him in heaven. And it is free. A gift. Not a reward. All because Jesus did it all for us on the cross and with his resurrection.

Think about this the next time you do something loving for your wife or husband, kids or neighbor. You are not doing it for a reward. It would even be fine if no one acknowledged it or said thank you. That is because you aren't doing it to gain anything. You are doing because you already gained forgiveness and heaven through Christ. You are doing it because you truly love the other person.

My dear friends, of course we want God to increase our faith, but also pray to God to use the faith you already have. Even if it is as small as a mustard seed, it can do the impossible. Pray for a faith that will not shrink. INJ Amen.