

# Fanning the Flame of Faith

Luke 17:5-19

Preached July 19, 2009  
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The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!" The Lord replied, "If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it would obey you. "Who among you would say to your slave who has just come in from plowing or tending sheep in the field, 'Come here at once and take your place at the table'? Would you not rather say to him, 'Prepare supper for me, put on your apron and serve me while I eat and drink; later you may eat and drink'? Do you thank the slave for doing what was commanded? So you also, when you have done all that you were ordered to do, say, 'We are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done!' " On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, they called out, saying, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" When he saw them, he said to them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." And as they went, they were made clean. Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. He prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan. Then Jesus asked, "Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" Then he said to him, "Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well."

**Introduction.** Sometimes people are able to make the correct connections and sometimes they are unable.

An insurance agent asked one of his female clients: "Do you know the present value of your husband's life insurance policy?" She replied, "What do you mean?" He continued, "If your husband died, what would you get?" She thought for a few moments and said, "A poodle."

In our scripture lesson this morning, there are essentially three paragraphs in the text. On the surface, it seems that each is a separate and unrelated thought – faith of a mustard seed, the master-servant relationship and 10 lepers. Each would seem to be a topic for individual study or a separate sermon.

But if we dare to dive deeper in this section, I believe we find that the sections are related to each other and address the request of the apostles – "Increase our faith."

Faith has long been an important topic for Christians. In the past three to four decades much has been said and written about faith. Among many there has been a type of "faith" movement. "Sole Fide," that is "*faith alone*" was the rally cry of the great reformer Martin Luther. The author of Hebrews wrote: *And without faith it is impossible to please God* (11:6). Given "faith's" centrality, it is important to have an understanding of what it is. Like the disciples of old, we too should want our faith to increase.

## Mustard Seed Faith.

During Jesus' ministry, the disciples often heard and saw the role faith played in people experiencing God's touch. Luke shared several stories of faith's role in people being forgiven (5:20; 7:50) and being healed (7:9; 12:48; 17:9; 18:42). In the gospel, Jesus spoke of people having great faith and little faith and questioned if some had any faith. Given the attention to the subject of faith, it is no surprise that the evangel came to Jesus asking for more "faith."

Jesus' initial response to their request is intriguing. "Suppose you have the faith the size of a mustard seed (which is a small seed about the end of sharpened pencil lead), you could say to this mulberry tree, "Go jump in the lake," and it will obey. Here Jesus is offering a metaphor that probably was somewhat humorous to his original hearers. Trees walking and jumping into water are rather odd things unless you are reading Tolkien or watching the Wizard of Oz. Who would want to command a tree to jump into the lake? This seems to be an odd use of faith.

Jesus' point is not intended to inspire his followers to command trees but to

provide an understanding of faith. Faith is powerful, even in the smallest quantity imaginable. It is mysterious, somewhat beyond logic and reason. We are not able to examine or measure it with our hands or fully understand its potential. Like the mustard seed, who but those who have seen it happen could imagine the seed could grow into a substantial plant. Even those who have witnessed it do not fully understand how it happens.

In a segment of the Christian community that could be referred to as mysterious, somewhat beyond logic and reason significant emphasis on using faith to gain God's blessings and to experience miracles is expressed. Many in this group would use Jesus' words here to highlight what they consider to be a central expression of faith – "say to this tree." Often members of this movement share the importance of "speaking" one's faith. Faith is largely something that is spoken or claimed. Faith is only saying positive words or claiming affirmatively what one wants. (That has been labeled, "Name it and claim it.")

If one only read Jesus' response to the disciples' request, the supposition of the faith movement would seem to be supported. But when we continue reading in the section of scripture, the gospel takes us deeper in the meaning of faith.

## Unworthy slaves.

The next section explains to the readers (us) that faith leads us to understand that we deserve nothing that comes from God's hand. "Name it and claim it."

Most in our time who read this story of the master and slave find it somewhat or extremely distasteful. First of all, we regard slavery as a form of evil and a wicked institution, especially in the history of our nation. Secondly, this story seems to paint God as the master who is "ungrateful" and "self-centered." To be honest, this story is not easy to read and to include in sermon. It was one with which Jesus' culture would have had less problems because of their acceptance of slavery as normal. But despite our distaste and its foreign nature, it conveys a central feature of faith.

Jesus begins the story by asking the hearer to imagine being a farmer who owned one slave. During the day the slave works in the field. When evening comes, the master expects the servant to fix dinner and serve it. Then the servant can have his meal. Then Jesus asks, "Would you thank the servant for doing what is expected?" That would be the slave's job.

Imagine a different scenario. You are eating a \$50-100 a plate banquet meal at the convention center. Your server has worked helping not only to set up but also to bring you food and drink. Do you invite her to sit with you for the meal? Do you leave a generous tip? (Most of you would say, "Thanks," for the service.) We know that it is the job of the server to serve.

Just after Jesus has made each member of his audience think about being the "master," he calls on them to change roles. "Now that you have imagined being the master, imagine being the slave – or the server at the banquet." What would each of us expect? Serving throughout the day and serving the meal is part of the job. It is what is expected.

So here is the punch line of this story. All that we do for God or what is done in obedience does not make us worthy of or merit his blessings or rewards. Nothing we can do earns God's favor. It is part of what is expected of us. We are unworthy of all God gives us. We are not entitled to God's blessings because of actions, faithfulness or identity as Christians and church members. All good things that come from God (and there are some many that it is beyond imagination) are a matter of grace. Understanding this is a central element of faith.

### Ten Lepers.

Immediately following this thought of the master-slave, Luke tells the story of ten lepers. At the end of the story, he ties the story back to the request for more faith – Jesus says to the one leper, "your faith has saved you."

While Jesus was traveling along the border between Galilee and Samaria, he encountered a band of 10 lepers. According to Jewish law and local customs, those who had leprosy lived in isolation from others. They had to

maintain a distance from those who were uninfected. When others approached, they were required to call out, "Unclean, unclean." This isolation was not a means of punishing someone with leprosy but a means to prevent its spread. Because of this isolation factor, a diagnosis of leprosy was deplorable.

In biblical times, leprosy covered a multitude of diseases and was not limited to what we call leprosy of our day that is known as Hansen's disease. These skin diseases were determined by an examination of the priests. There are two long chapters in Leviticus that discuss these diseases and what was to be done to those infected.

When the ten lepers saw Jesus, they approached him but maintained the appropriate distance. They raised their voice and shouted to Jesus: "*Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!*" They had a need and they called out to Jesus.

In their words we see a second element of faith. Faith is expressed as a request that comes from a state of dependence on God. Faith asks God for what is needed. Faith realizes that one cannot meet the need and God's help is essential. Through faith, a person places him/herself or the situation in God's hands and looks for a gracious response. Notice in the request of the lepers is a return to the earlier theme of "unworthiness" – this is a call for mercy. Mercy is a gracious act that is not deserved.

When Jesus heard this request, he responded to the lepers. As was often the case, Jesus gave some orders ("Take up your bed," "Go wash in the pool"). He gave them directions to go and to show themselves to the priest who could declare they were cleansed.

These lepers started their journey to find a priest. Now this may have seemed somewhat problematic. What if they got to the priest and they were still covered with the skin lesions. Yet they started their journey even before there was evidence anything had happened. Their response to do what Jesus had instructed was an act of faith. Here is the third element of faith. Faith is obeying what Jesus/God instructs us to do.

God nudges us in many ways through various sources. Often in situations we

face, God speaks through scripture, speaks in the quiet voice of the Spirit within, through other people, through thoughts and research, through nature, etc. Faith obeys the instructions from God.

This does not mean we will always receive what we hope for. The call for mercy does not always end in physical healing. At times God grants the infirmed and the loved ones the grace to endure through suffering. Sometimes God grants the grace of death – closing the chapter of this life and entering into life beyond this life in God's presence.

Nearly a month ago, I visited with an uncle who had been suffering from pancreatic cancer for nearly two years. He had lost much weight, was restricted to the bed and extremely weak. We had prayer together. Two weeks ago, God answered our call for mercy and healing. Uncle Daryl died. He was given grace through the illness and grace if death. Now he is in God's presence.

When one of the lepers noticed his skin had cleared up, he knew Jesus' medicine had worked. He immediately turned back and began to come toward Jesus. He was excited and praised God. When he caught up, he fell at Jesus' feet and thanked him. This man was a Samaritan.

The inclusion of the lepers and the Samaritan returning to thank Jesus highlights an interesting side bar in this story. Lepers and Samaritans were excluded from the community of the Jews. Most people looked down on them. But here Jesus sees and hears them and includes them. His kingdom includes those who are the outcasts of society and the religious community. This fits with Luke's central theme seeking and saving last, least and lost.

Let's return to the final component of faith highlighted in this passage. The Samaritan leper worshiped God and thanked Jesus. Another aspect of faith is the expression of worship and gratitude. People of faith worship God and thank the Lord. Often this is done long before there is evidence of God's blessing in particular situations. People of faith remember what God has done and live with the notion that God is acting in the present.

**Summary.**

How do we apply this to our lives? Pleasing God and experiencing the fullness of his kingdom require faith. Like the disciples, we should long for our faith to increase.

Some of the components of faith are:

- Understanding that all of God's blessing are a matter of his goodness and grace and has nothing to do with our worth or merit.
- Faith calls out to God for mercy and trusts
- Faith acts in obedience to what God calls us to do
- Faith brings us to worship and express our thanks to God.

**Invitation.**

This morning I want each of us to have an opportunity to express our thanks to God. As music is being played, please reflect on issues whether personal or related to others that you want to share with the Lord. Where you are seated, call out to God with these in silence.

After a few moments, we will then turn in a time of expressing thanks through singing – *"Now Thank We All our God"* - #102