

International Sunday School Lesson
Study Notes
May 1, 2015

Lesson Text: Luke 17:1-10
Lesson Title: Increasing Faith

Introduction

Our Lord's teaching in Luke 17 takes place in the final months prior to His arrival in Jerusalem to be crucified. During this time, His focus is on teaching the gospel of the kingdom. He travels back and forth across the land working miracles and casting out demons, to prove He is the promised Messiah bringing salvation. His teaching cycled back and forth between His disciples and His enemies, people who sincerely followed Him and others who sought opportunities to destroy Him. In spite of the large and mixed group of listeners, Jesus made the most of each occasion to teach truth (Luke 12:1).

Luke 17 centers around the Apostles request, "Lord, Increase our faith" (Luke 17:5). They were overwhelmed with Jesus' teaching and knew it was impossible to obey in every area. If you are a true student of God's Word and serious about living for Christ, you will often be overwhelmed by God's commandments and requirements. Christ taught us to "*Love your enemies...*" (Luke 6:27). He also said, "*...but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also*" (Matthew 5:39). The Apostle Paul said, "*Rejoice evermore. Pray without ceasing. In everything give thanks*" (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18). The list goes on and on. How can we possibly obey these commands of Scripture? Do we need our faith increased?

There are four reasons Jesus' disciples asked Him to increase their faith in Luke 17:1-10. As you study these reasons you will notice their request seems to be for extra faith to accomplish what was humanly impossible. To ask for an "increase" in "faith" would seem a noble request. However, in this context, Jesus seems to be saying, "Do what is required of you as a Christian. Focus on your duty and even a small amount of genuine faith can accomplish what is humanly impossible."

Faith and the Danger of Offending Someone (Luke 17:1-2)

Verse 1-2

"Then said he unto the disciples, It is impossible but that offences will come: but woe unto him, through whom they come! It were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and he cast into the sea, than that he should offend one of these little ones."

“It is impossible but that offences will come” means Jesus acknowledged the presence of stumbling blocks along the path to the kingdom of God. “Offenses” is the Greek word *skandalon* {skan-dal-on}, which means “to spring forward and backward, slam shut, close on something.” The word was used in the Greek language to describe a baited cage with a spring-loaded door, something like a modern-day rabbit trap.

Jesus used the word “offences” in this context to describe someone walking toward God’s kingdom and stumbling or falling into a trap or pit before they arrived. He issues a warning to the disciples, “woe unto him, through whom offences come!” Jesus warned His disciples, “Do not allow yourself to be a danger or stumbling block to others.” True men and women of faith do not allow themselves to hinder others from entering God’s kingdom.

Jesus intensified His point by introducing the “little ones.” The “little ones” in this context does not exclusively refer to children or babies. “Little ones” refers to potential believers. Potential believers are like children in that they are helpless and need proper instruction. Jesus’ disciples were to help “little ones” get to the kingdom of God. The punishment for someone causing one of these potential believers in Christ to stumble is severe. Jesus said, “It were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and he cast into the sea...” A “millstone” was a large, heavy stone used to grind grain into flour. Jesus combined a “millstone” with being “cast into the sea” to create a horrible picture of spiritual destruction awaiting anyone who hindered a potential believer from coming to Christ for salvation.

Note: Who “offends” or hinders potential believers today? False teachers are the greatest offenders of “little ones” (Matthew 7:15; 24:11; 2 Peter 2:1; 1 John 4:1). Professing Christians who are unfaithful to the Lord can easily offend a potential believer. Those who do not know Christ need to see consistent faithful Christian living from those who profess to belong to Christ.

When the disciples heard Jesus’ words and warning about being a stumbling block to potential believers, they said, “Lord, Increase our faith.” It is easy to understand how the disciples would conclude, “We need more faith to avoid being a stumbling block.” To walk in a manner so as not to cause a potential believer to stumble was not an easy or automatic behavior. They needed faith. So do we!

Jesus said, “...offences will come.” We live in a fallen world where people’s actions and attitudes hinder others from coming to Christ. Sadly, that is even true in churches. Jesus said it is better for a man to die than to live a life hindering people from salvation. This is serious business!

Faith and Our Difficulty in Forgiving (Luke 17:3-4)

Verse 3-4

“Take heed to yourselves: If thy brother trespass against thee, rebuke him; and if he repent, forgive him. And if he trespass against thee seven times in a day, and seven times in a day turn again to thee, saying, I repent; thou shalt forgive him.”

Jesus moved from the possibility of offending a potential believer to the practical everyday reality of unforgiveness. He warned, “Take heed to yourselves...” It means “be on guard, be in a state of alert, watch out.” Jesus did not want His disciples to fall into the same destructive patterns as the Pharisees of being judgmental and unforgiving.

“Brother” is a term of relationship, specifically speaking about “brothers” or fellow believers. Relationships require constant attention. If not, they can end up in disaster. It takes faith to maintain the proper relationships with others.

Jesus told His disciples to “rebuke” a “brother” when he “trespassed against” him. “Rebuke” means “call attention to the wrong.” The “trespass” here is not sin in general, but one brother’s “sin” against another brother. If a brother in Christ sins against you, you are to call his attention to the sin and then forgive him. This “trespass” or sin is not to lay and fester. As believers we must not allow sins to lie for months and years. Tiny cuts can become serious infections and lead to death if not dealt with in a timely and proper manner.

“Forgive” means “to release.” In other words, loose him from his obligation to repay a debt, prove to you he is sincere, or live under your scrutiny and judgment. We are to confront sin immediately and forgive quickly. The disciples are listening intently to Jesus’ teaching and thinking, “We are going to need an increase in faith to do this.”

Jesus statement, “And if he trespass against thee seven times in a day, and seven times in a day turn again to thee, saying, I repent; thou shalt forgive him” seems like foolish counsel. On the surface, someone who would actually forgive someone nearly fifty times each week would be perceived as insincere. Jesus is exaggerating for the sake of effect. His point is we should be willing to forgive no matter how often our brother sins against us. This too requires faith.

Faith and Our Deficiency in Life (Luke 17:5-6)

Verse 5-6

“And the apostles said unto the Lord, Increase our faith. And the Lord said, If ye had faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye might say unto this sycamine tree,

Be thou plucked up by the root, and be thou planted in the sea; and it should obey you.”

The “apostles” were the Twelve Jesus called and sent out to preach (Luke 9:1-6). They were basically nobodies; no scribes, no Pharisees, no spiritual heritage, just twelve ordinary men Jesus called and set apart to do His work. They had witnessed our Lord’s miraculous power and heard His powerful teaching. In spite of all they had seen and heard they sensed a need for their faith to be increased. What Christ is calling them to be and do is contrary to anything they can accomplish within their own power. They must have an increase in faith.

When the “apostles” ask, “Lord, Increase our faith,” they are saying, “Lord, we cannot live up to this. We are going to need something more than we now have.” “Increase” means “to place additionally, to add.” It is possible they viewed “faith” as a kind of “super fuel” to accomplish the miraculous. That is a common misunderstanding today among some professing believers.

Jesus’ answer, “If ye had faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye might say unto this sycamine tree, Be thou plucked up by the root, and be thou planted in the sea; and it should obey you,” indicates more faith is not the real issue. *“Faith is not measured by its quantity, but simply by its presence”* (Pastor Stephen J. Cole). According to Jesus, a “mustard seed” size faith can accomplish impossible things such as moving a “sycamine tree” from its roots in the soil and casting it “in the sea.”

In Matthew 13:31 Jesus refers to the “mustard seed” as the smallest seed used in the gardens of the people of Israel. The “mustard seed,” although tiny, becomes a huge tree when it is grown. The “sycamine tree” (not a sycamore) was also a large tree with longevity of life. It could best be compared to a willow tree today. Jesus’ message in this analogy to the Twelve is that by believing in the Messiah with their initial “mustard seed” faith, they could exercise their faith and do whatever He asked or commanded. They did not need an “increase” of “faith” in the sense of “super fuel” or some supernatural infusion of belief. They needed to take their initial faith and slowly and consistently grow toward maturity.

Here is Jesus’ point stated a different way. The apostles know they must live by faith. Jesus says, “I do not want you to be focused on the size of that faith or the quantity of that faith. I want you to know the reality of faith.” It is faith we need in order to receive God’s grace and power to do the things Christ has commanded. Christ wants us to be utterly dependent upon Him in order to do these things He requires.

Faith and the Demands of Service (Luke 17:7-10)

Verse 7-8

“But which of you, having a servant plowing or feeding cattle, will say unto him by and by, when he is come from the field, Go and sit down to meat? And will not rather say unto him, Make ready wherewith I may sup, and gird thyself, and serve me, till I have eaten and drunken; and afterward thou shalt eat and drink?”

Jesus presented an imaginary illustration designed to give its own answer, and to make clear what the place of a faithful servant is. The “servant” in this illustration is the modern equivalent of a long-term employee. The Lord asked a rhetorical question: “Which of you who have hired an employee to do a job will tell him what to do and then go to the field where he is working and tell him ‘Go and sit down to meat?’” The employer does not tell the employee to stop working and go eat. The proper order is for the employer (owner of the servant) to have his meal prepared by the employee (servant).

In the culture of Jesus’ day, “servants” (employees) had a very simple job description: Do everything your master commands. “Servants” did not give orders; they took orders. They did not negotiate with the master (employer) what their privileges would be. They were not free to picket for better working conditions. When they came in after a hard day in the fields, they did not expect their owners to have dinner ready for them. They could not tell their master, “I have had a rough day. Get your own dinner!” They came in and served their master. Only afterwards could they eat their own dinner.

Verse 9

“Doth he thank that servant because he did the things that were commanded him? I trow not.”

Continuing with the “servant-master” (employee-employer) analogy, Jesus asks, “Suppose the servant had done everything the master asked. Should the servant expect to be showered with praise?” The answer to this question is, “I trow not,” or “no.” Yet sometimes we Christians act as if it were so in the case of our service to Christ. Forgetting that He has, in the light of the cross, a right to our devotion and service, we sometimes expect a reward or recognition for everything we do. Service to Him is its own reward!

Verse 10

“So likewise ye, when ye shall have done all those things which are commanded you, say, We are unprofitable servants: we have done that which was our duty to do.”

This is a humbling verse, particularly for those who have taken pride in doing out simple duty. Jesus' point is, you do not earn brownie points with God for doing what He has commanded! He wanted His disciples to know they were only doing their duty when they avoided being a stumbling block, forgiving their brother, and realizing how weak they were within themselves.

When we have faithfully obeyed our Master and done everything He has commanded, we should say, "We are unprofitable servants: we have done that which was our duty to do." Do not pat yourself on the back for being a Christian. Your reward for faithfulness will be in heaven.

Conclusion

When the apostles said, "Lord, Increase our faith," they were most likely thinking about the need of more. When Jesus finished His teaching they knew genuine faith was not about *quantity* but *quality*. The initial faith you were given when you trusted Christ is sufficient for everything our Lord requires. That initial faith is able to do the impossible when we remember who we are and determine to obey our Lord's command.

Faith increases not by some supernatural infusion or some special service at church. It increases by simple obedience and performance of duty.

We live in a day that encourages selfishness and personal reward. We must never forget we are the servants and Christ is our Master. He owes us nothing; we owe Him everything. When given the opportunity to serve, serve! When you have served, lay aside any thoughts of compensation. Remember you are His servant. If you live knowing and practicing that, your faith is increasing!

Amen.