

Happy Thanksgiving! There is so much to be thankful for in our lives. Our homes and families, our friends and the sweet memories they provide, and a Word from the Lord. This evening as we take a break from our preparations for the big day tomorrow, I want to give us something to think about as regards our relationship with God according to the words of Jesus, the one to whom we give thanks for everything.

OPENING PRAYER

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, we heard three metaphors or images which help us to understand our relationship with God. Taken together, they are 3-steps to becoming a first rate, top-drawer disciple of Christ. Let’s take a look at them.

The first metaphor Jesus gave us was the “**millstone.**” Listen again to what he said: **“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. Pay attention to yourselves!” (vv.1-3a)**

When Jesus said, **“Temptations to sin are sure to come,”** he was not talking about the usual things like stealing and adultery. Rather, he was talking about how we might lead other people into sin through our hypocrisy.

Hypocrisy is to say one thing but do another, as if I were to say something like, “On Thanksgiving, you should be kind to your family members, even those you find irritating,” and then to go home and pick a fight with my dad. Because a hypocrite cannot hide his lies for long, his empty words will be revealed, and when they are others will scoff at him, and even worse, they will see that his faith is worthless for he mocks the Lord. In the end, persons who are weak in faith may be lead astray, multiplying the sin! That’s why Jesus said it would be better for a person to tie a millstone around his neck and go swimming!

Jesus said, **“Pay attention to yourselves”** to prevent this from happening. In the Greek, **“pay attention”** is also translated, “Take heed!” “Be careful!” or “Watch out!” Jesus wanted us to understand that we need to treat this matter of our brother’s and sister’s relationship with God very seriously.

Earlier, Jesus said, **“Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, 'Brother, let me take out the speck that is in your eye,' when you yourself do not see the log that is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take out the speck that is in your brother's eye” (Luke 6:41-42).**

Jesus called the thing in my eye a **“log”** because I will need outside assistance to remove it. On a particular occasion a brother in the faith reproached me for my bad behavior. I had to confess I hadn’t seen it like he had, and he was right. Sometimes we need another person to say to us, “Hey, you’re screwing up. Take a look in the mirror. **“Pay attention to yourself”** in order to get squared away.

Of course, it's all very painful to receive help from another person in this way. But we can't see otherwise, and if we can't see, then we can't recognize the path the Lord is trying to lead us down.

Jesus' second metaphor is the "**mustard seed.**" He said, "**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**" (vv.3b-6).

We've probably heard about "**mustard seed**" faith countless times. Unfortunately, it is rarely applied to Jesus' teaching about forgiveness, which is the context of the passage. Again, Jesus said, "**If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him.**" And then the disciples said, "**Increase our faith!**" They knew they didn't have it in their hearts to rebuke a brother who sinned nor the power to forgive as the Lord instructed them, that it would take more than will power to do this.

It's not easy to rebuke a brother or sister in Christ. We can hurt them if we're not careful. But I think it's helpful that this instruction follows the Lord's teaching about hypocrisy, for we don't want to be hypocrites, but we don't want to be silent either. To rebuke a fellow believer requires wisdom, love, and faith, faith like a mustard seed.

The mustard seed is a great image for faith, for it is the tiniest of seeds, and yet it grows into a great bush. So too our faith begins very small, even as small as a baptized child's heart. But as that faith is nourished with the proclamation of Jesus' death and resurrection, as it's strengthened with the body and blood of Christ in his supper, it becomes a force, a power that may change the world.

Again, Jesus 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,**" Just to be clear, it was not Christ's intention that we fill up the sea with mulberry trees! But he was using picture language to describe how powerful our faith can be, so powerful we will even be able to forgive each other for our sins.

Indeed, a world filled with people who have been forgiven would be far more interesting than an ocean full of mulberry trees!

Our first image was the **millstone**, which was the Lord's admonition to avoid hypocrisy at all costs.

Our second image was the **mustard seed**, which means we should pray for faith, even a little faith, a mustard seed faith, that we might have the courage to hold fellow Christians accountable and the heart to forgive them when they repent.

Jesus' third metaphor was "**servant.**" He said, "**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'"** (vv.7-10).

Perhaps we have been so steeped in Christian jargon for so long that the idea of servanthood hardly touches our spirit. But know this: The proposition that Christians are by definition servants of God or slaves to Jesus—which is precisely the language St. Paul uses later on—is one of the most abhorrent ideas of Christianity to unbelievers, which is easy to understand since our first parents, Adam and Eve, rejected the idea.

But there's something appealing about being God's servant. For one thing, it means I don't have to figure everything out. God does all the heavy lifting; I just follow his orders. And secondly, it means God has personally taken responsibility for taking care of me. That's what masters do for their servants.

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

And God has given us Jesus to remove our shame and renew our hearts.

This Thanksgiving let us thank God for calling us his disciples, and then let us consider the three images he's given us to grow in our discipleship. Let us consider our lives in Christ according to the **millstone**, a symbol for how we've chosen to live without hypocrisy. Let us think about our faith in Christ according to the **mustard seed**, a faith that grows every day that we might forgive others. And let us think about ourselves as **servants**, servants of the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, obeying his orders, building up the Kingdom of God by his grace, in the name of Jesus. Amen.