

The Christian's Faith Is Sensitive.

Text: Luke 17:1-10

1) To The Weaknesses Of Others

Suggested Hymns:

2) To Its Own Need

499, 490, 321, 395, 368

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is Luke 17:1-10, ¹ *Then He said to the disciples, "It is impossible that no offenses should come, but woe to him through whom they do come!"* ² *"It would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were thrown into the sea, than that he should offend one of these little ones."* ³ *"Take heed to yourselves. If your brother sins against you, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him."* ⁴ *"And if he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times in a day returns to you, saying, 'I repent,' you shall forgive him."*

⁵ *And the apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith."* ⁶ *So the Lord said, "If you have faith as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, 'Be pulled up by the roots and be planted in the sea,' and it would obey you."*

⁷ *"And which of you, having a servant plowing or tending sheep, will say to him when he has come in from the field, 'Come at once and sit down to eat'?"* ⁸ *"But will he not rather say to him, 'Prepare something for my supper, and gird yourself and serve me till I have eaten and drunk, and afterward you will eat and drink'?"* ⁹ *"Does he thank that servant because he did the things that were commanded him? I think not."*

¹⁰ *"So likewise you, when you have done all those things which you are commanded, say, 'We are unprofitable servants. We have done what was our duty to do.'" (NKJV)*

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

How sensitive are you? How sensitive are your faculties of sight, for example? Do you walk the streets of your community and miss half of

the sights? Can you walk through a beautiful park and not really notice all the smaller flowers and all the delicate colours a bountiful God has painted on the petals of countless flowers?

How sensitive is your touch? When you and I run our fingertips over a page of Braille type, we feel only a rough sea of dents and points. But a blind person, whose fingers have been trained, runs his fingers over the same page and reads, ¹⁶ ***“For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.”***¹ It pays to develop the sensitivity of our natural faculties.

How sensitive is your faith? Does it respond only to a few fundamental doctrines of sacred Scripture, or does it respond to every teaching which it finds in God’s Word? In His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus tried to sensitise the faith of His disciples. Behind every one of His statements, **“You have heard, was, but I say to you.”**²

How sensitive is your faith? Does it recognise its own needs and its own defects, or is it satisfied with the way it is? Is it sensitive to the feelings, needs, and weaknesses of others, or does it live in utter disregard for the feelings of others?

Jesus tried to sensitise the faith of His disciples. We will have to respond to His teachings in order to have a real, vibrant, growing, and glowing faith. We will be richly rewarded in our Christian life if we study our text carefully, and, with God’s help, endeavour to model our faith according to His pattern. The theme of the sermon is, *The Christian’s Faith Is Sensitive*. May the Lord bless our meditation.

1. The Christian’s Faith Is Sensitive To The Weaknesses Of Others

The Christian Is Not Alone

The Christian is not an ostrich, hiding his head in the sand, nor a hermit, hiding away from the real world in a cave. He knows full well that he belongs to and is part of a worldwide community. As a Christian he has been called out of the darkness of unbelief into which he was helplessly born into a new community, the community of believers.

The Christian understands that he belongs to the communion of saints. He cannot and he has no desire to live in this community by himself. He not only gives to this community, but he also receives so much from this community.

As a child of God he still lives in the community of an unsaved world. He is not of the world, but he definitely is still in the world — in unfriendly surroundings. A Christian is, therefore, sensitive to his surrounding and to the people around him.

Verses 1 & 2 of our text teach us that the Christian endeavours to live, so as not to give offence to others around him.

Because he knows the weaknesses of his fellow Christians and of those who do not belong to the household of faith, he realises how easy it is to give offence to others. He knows that by some unguarded word or by some thoughtless deed he may actually harm the faith of a Christian, or hinder an unbeliever from believing the message of free grace in Christ, the Saviour.

If he ever gives credence to any false teaching or lives in some known sin, he knows that some unconverted person may be strengthened in his indifference or unbelief. He is, then, extremely sensitive to the possibility of becoming a hindrance or snare to a weaker brother or sister.

He also knows how true it is what Jesus says about offence — some cannot be avoided. He remembers reading in the Gospels that many people turned away from following Jesus because He told the plain truth to hardened sinners. He knows that when he fearlessly confesses his faith before some people, that they will take offence and close the door to further opportunity to witness.

He remembers what storms of protest St. Paul caused by his fearless witnessing to the crucified and risen Saviour among the bitter Jews. He sympathises with his pastor and with the elders of his congregation who sometimes must accept abuse from those whom they are trying to help turn from the paths of sin, to the pathways of Christian living.

He knows that it is impossible to live among people and not give offence. But this is such a serious matter to him because he earnestly desires to see all people brought to saving faith and to remain in the saving faith, he is so sensitive to this problem.

He guards his words and discreetly watches his actions so that he may avoid giving offence needlessly and heedlessly. His faith is sensitive — not coarse and reckless and thoughtless. He has no sympathy with those Christians who recklessly treat other people with disdain and excuse themselves by piously saying, *“I say what I think, and I don’t care what anybody thinks about it.”*

A sincere Christian *“takes heed to himself”* and really endeavours to live so as not to give offence to others. He is the salt of the earth — a wonderful person to know and to live with. He lives his faith.

Verse 4 teaches us that the Christian kindly rebukes his erring brother.

While he lives his faith, he will also meet people — many people — who are living in a soul-destroying sin and who must be rebuked and corrected. He is not a son of Cain who says, **“Am I my brother’s keeper?”** Because these people all belong to his community, he loves them all, because Christ loved them all and died for all. Even if others do not know it, he knows that sin separates people from God. He is not indifferent to the seriousness of this matter. His brother may assure him that he is not worried about this sin and that he will take his chance on Judgment Day. But the Christian knows how fatal this reasoning is.

His faith is sensitive. He must rebuke his brother or sister in the winsome manner in which His beloved Saviour rebuked sinners. He sees Nathan going to an impenitent David and rebuking him with kindness and firmness. He strives to go and do likewise.

He is careful that he does not fall into the easy habit of mercilessly scolding his brother or holding him up to scorn and contempt. He will have nothing to do with the shameless Pharisees who gleefully brought the woman taken in adultery into public gaze and humiliation.

He loves his brother, and so he will kindly show him his damning sin and plead with him to forsake the sin and to correct his life. He will not continually pick his neighbour to pieces because he falls into sins of weakness which he is trying to overcome. He is deeply concerned about those sins which will rob him of his faith. He cannot help himself. He loves his brother, and his faith is sensitive to his danger. He cannot stand idly by and see a brother or sister or any child walking dangerously near the brink of the edge without doing something. He must point out the danger and lead to safer ground.

A sensitive faith knows that it may be rebuffed for doing this, but it still charitably rebukes the erring brother.

Verses 3b & 4 teach us that the Christian eagerly forgives the penitent sinner.

Since the Christian rebukes the erring brother in order to bring him to repentance, he naturally is happy and eager to forgive the penitent brother. He knows that there is genuine rejoicing in the presence of the holy angels of God over one sinner who repents.

He knows that the loving Father stands with arms outstretched to receive the prodigal son home, regardless of where he has come from, or what he has been up to. His sensitive faith is just so thrilled to hear the penitent say, *“I am sincerely and truly sorry.”* He flings his arms around him and forgives him in the name of Jesus Christ, whose blood cleanses from any sin.

And he does this not only once or perhaps twice, but many times. He remembers that a merciful Father has to forgive him the sins he commits over and over again against better knowledge. Even when he suspects that the repentance of the professing brother is not genuine, he will still forgive him. Even if the repentance is not sincere, his forgiveness must be sincere and genuine. He will not act like Jonah, who became very angry with God because God forgave the penitent Ninevites.

He will again follow the example of Jesus, who, from the agony of the cross, pronounced forgiveness upon those who were sinning in ignorance. He will treat his penitent brother just as his own loving father and mother treated him over and over again when they forgave him every time he came and said, *“I am sorry, Mother and Father.”* His sensitive faith makes it easy for him to forgive the penitent sinner over and over again.

In this way his faith, by exercise, grows more sensitive all the time and thus grows. Such a faith is active and victorious. Such a faith meets the requirements of Jesus.

2. The Christian’s Faith Is Sensitive To Its Own Need.

Yet such a sensitive faith is not oblivious to self. The Christian knows full well that he must continually and prayerfully contend for the faith that has been

born in him through the blessed efforts of God's Holy Spirit, using the means which He has designed and designated, namely, God's powerful Word and the efficacious sacraments.

The Christian knows from bitter experience that he himself is beset with many temptations from within and from without. Not the least of the dangers which lie hidden and concealed along life's highways is a smugness and a satisfaction with faith as it is. The Christian is always restless when he looks closely and sharply at his faith. He feels the need of undergirding, underpinning, and strengthening his personal faith.

Verse 5 teaches us that faith cries out for increase.

Faith cries out with the alerted disciples, **“Lord, increase our faith.”** A sensitive faith looks to self-improvement. It does not look for any new gimmicks. It does not reach out for a *“do-it-yourself”* kit. It knows the Source of new strength and dips its bucket into the well of the living Word and drinks and revives. A sensitive faith is a growing faith.

As the oak tree which stands away from other trees and takes the full brunt of the winds and storms has the deepest roots and the finest grain, so a faith which stands up to the tests of God is the strongest and proven faith.

We marvel at the faith of Abraham, which rested only on the bare promises of God, even though those promises ran counter to reason and nature. But how that faith grew to new proportions as it made the journey to Mount Moriah! Every step which father Abraham took as he climbed the hill was a test of his faith. We can almost hear the cry being wrung from his anxious heart, **“Lord, increase my faith!”**

When Abraham descended from that mountain, his faith had a new glow. It had been tuned to the will of God. The reed had been bent and all was harmonious now. Thus the faith of Abraham grew and became more sensitive through trial and testing. That has often been God's way with people.

When man cries for a stronger faith, God often answers by leading us into the shadows — only to lead us refreshed into the sunlight. The ore has to be refined and subjected to terrific heat to permit the gold to settle at the bottom. The slag has to be separated from the nickel to produce the pure ingot.

Likewise God works with the believer in many different ways in order to improve and strengthen his faith. If the Christian rebels against these tests of faith, he frustrates the designs of God to increase his faith.

When we cry, **“Lord, increase our faith,”** then we also make a solemn promise to permit God to have His way. The prayer is ours, but the answer is His. Thus we pray for a faith³

*That will not murmur or complain
Beneath the chast'ning rod,
But in the hour of grief or pain
Can lean upon its God;*

*A faith that shines more bright and clear
When tempests rage without;
That when in danger knows no fear,
In darkness feels no doubt.*

When the disciples realised what Jesus expected of their faith, their hearts cried out, **“Lord, increase our faith.”** When you and I, my fellow Christians, realise what kind of faith we need, then let us flee to the Throne of Grace and plead, **“Lord, increase our faith.”** If we will let God have His way, then our faith will grow and increase more and more.

Verse 6 teaches us that such faith recognises that it has limitless potential.

Instead of doing something spectacular for the disciples, our Lord turned to them and said, ***If you have faith as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be pulled up by the roots and be planted in the sea,’ and it would obey you.*** Do you think the disciples were disappointed in this response to their request? Do you think they fully understood then what Jesus was trying to say to them?

We have had two thousand years to meditate upon these words of Jesus — and they still amaze us. It almost sounds as though Jesus did not understand their prayer. They had asked for an increase in the quantity of their faith, and He speaks to them about a faith as small as a mustard seed. To such a small faith Jesus ascribes limitless power. He has to correct their thinking about faith.

It is not so much that they need more faith in quantity, but that they need a more genuine faith. They were to examine the essence of their faith, rather than the magnitude of their faith. If faith is genuine, it can perform seemingly impossible things, even though it is small as a mustard seed.

The sincere Christian's concern, therefore, is not primarily to possess mountains of faith, but rather to possess the true seed of faith. We do not necessarily need the faith of Abraham to accomplish seemingly impossible things; but we need a faith that is genuine, born of the Holy Spirit.

Faith, then, is not only sensitive to its own weakness, but it is also sensitive to its strength. It does not lament the fact that it is not an Abraham or a David or a Roman centurion; but it thrills to the fact that it is genuine and that it is empowered with the full power of God, upon which it can draw.

It does not daydream about becoming a 'superman,' but it realises that it has limitless power within its grasp. Faith blushes when it realises that it has not been flexing its muscles at all and that the impossible, was possible all the time. Our faith flushes with shame to hear Jesus point out to us that the power was there all the time.

So we shift our attention from the quantity of our faith to the quality of our faith. Now we begin to understand why Jesus was so concerned about the genuineness of faith as He found it in men of His generation. Now we understand why He so vigorously condemned the sham and shallow faith of the religious leaders of His day. They seemed to be satisfied with the form of faith, without looking to see what was in that form. Jesus saw how empty that form was, even though they were making a great show of it.

But we are deeply concerned about our own faith now. We must be sure that it is not just a formal faith which we are carrying around in an empty box. Such a faith is powerless and can produce no real fruits. But how can we know that our faith is genuine and that it can accomplish great things?

It is genuine if it rests entirely and completely on the powerful Word of God. It is genuine if it apprehends the grace of God in Christ Jesus and trusts one hundred percent on the grace of God for salvation. Such a faith has been born through the workings of the Holy Spirit. It is a genuine faith if it exercises itself in good works.

The disciples had such faith but were not making full use of it. Jesus challenged them to use their faith and to expect great things to happen. In like manner Jesus challenges us to exercise our faith and to permit it to accomplish seemingly impossible things. His challenge shows our weakness and inability to act. Here we have a faith that could do so much, but we are not making use of it!

Faith it is Spirit-born, and it is also Spirit-filled. And with God nothing is impossible. So, let us put our faith to work, assuredly expecting it to accomplish wonderful things for us, according to the will of God.

Verses 7 to 10 teach us that faith is sensitive to its own unworthiness.

Lest the disciples now become pumped up with conceit and pride and with the feeling of their own greatness in being able to perform such great things, Jesus tells them a short story to keep them humble.

When the servant, who has been working in the fields all day, comes home from the fields, he does not expect the master to serve him. He remembers who he is and continues to fulfil his duties to his master. He does not feel that he has deserved a bonus because he has done what he was hired to do.

So likewise, Jesus says that we should not become demanding and proud and haughty when we accomplish great things with the faith which God has bestowed. When we have rendered a great service, we should still say, '***We are unprofitable servants. We have done what was our duty to do.***' We cannot claim a special worthiness because God has permitted us to do greater things than others with our faith.

A sensitive faith will not despise those who have not yet learned to put faith into full action. Faith is sensitive to its own unworthiness and ascribes all glory and success to the grace of God. A sensitive faith does not blow its own trumpet to attract attention to itself, but rather it attracts attention to the grace of God in Christ.

When St. Paul referred to his own life and labours as a witness to the workings of God in men, then he invariably pointed out that it was the grace of God which performed these things in him, even though he himself had once resisted the grace of God.

Paul was afraid that his congregations might ascribe to him any glory or honour which was due only to God. How often he interrupts himself to interject, ***“But by the grace of God I am what I am”***⁴ St. Paul was sensitive to his own unworthiness, even though the victories of his dynamic faith stand out above anything else which is recorded in the New Testament.

Paul would despise anyone who claims for his own person and effort the power which comes from God through a sincere faith. Likewise, Christians who have claimed the victories of a powerful faith ought not and dare not claim any honour for a “superior” faith. We are all unworthy servants. We are the caretakers of the faith which our Father has given us through the means of grace.

Consider this illustration. We all know that a car battery is made up of a box with plates suspended in it. Standing empty, it has no power whatever in it. A mechanic must add the acid. The chemical reaction now produces power to start a motor, which drives a car hour upon hour. When the battery is run down because of overuse, abuse or neglect, then the mechanic charges the battery by feeding a strong current into the battery.

Man’s faith would be empty and powerless unless God adds the divine power to it. Such faith would run out again unless God continues to charge this faith with power through the means of grace. If faith cannot produce bountiful fruits, then that faith is not being charged regularly by the Word and the sacraments. Then we must check our connections again and secure them!

A faith that is regularly nurtured by the Word of God and the sacrament of our Lord’s body and blood will be powerful and effective. It will accomplish great things if we will permit it to exercise itself. But it will still be a humble faith.

What a wonderful thing a living faith is! It will busy itself in serving all other people in the community of our world. It will be sensitive to the weaknesses of others and will try to remove these weaknesses and help replace them with the strength of Christian faith. It will carefully avoid giving offence. It will charitably rebuke the erring brother and eagerly forgive him when he repents. It will recognise its own weaknesses and shortcomings and will daily charge this faith with the diligent reception of that divine power which comes from the life-giving Word of the living and powerful God.

Christian, you can possess such a sensitive and victorious faith! Pray with all your heart, *“Lord, give me such a faith as this.”* Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds, in Christ Jesus. Amen.

¹ John 3:16

² Matt. 5:21; 5:27; 5:33; 5:38, etc.

³ Hymn 395

⁴ 1 Cor. 15:10