

Jesus Describes Faith

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[0 : 00] As to return to Luke's Gospel, chapter 17, we've been going through Luke now for best part of a year, but we're going to carry on into the New Year as well.

But we're looking today at Jesus' ongoing teaching to the disciples and therefore to us. And I'm glad today, in many ways, I kept my denim jacket and my flares.

Because they are coming back, or have come back, or will come back, or have gone back and are going out again of fashion. It's good to keep your old clothes, you know, especially when you get to the young people, I'll give you some advice.

Keep all your old fashionable clothes, because they'll come back into fashion. Because fashion just goes around like that. And that's very often what happens.

And in many ways, there's nothing new under the sun, is there? And I think sometimes we feel that truth goes out of fashion, or certain aspects of truth go out of fashion.

[1 : 08] And there's some of the words and some of the concepts that I'll be using today that will appear quite unfashionable, maybe, today. Even in church, even in Christian circles, some of the concepts.

Because we always want to reinvent truth, don't we? We want to make it new, and we've got a tendency to think that our generation is, well, we're the most sophisticated.

We know the most, and everything else from the past is worthless, because we have many more discoveries, and we're much more intelligent and sophisticated. And yet, it's so often the case that we'll find that there are fads that people have with regard to the truth as well.

Some things are unpopular for a while, and some things don't fit in with our 21st century mentality. And so we ditch them. And yet we find that the truth is something that, while it may be unfashionable, never goes out of date, because it's the word and the revelation of God, and it's to ourselves.

And really, people don't change that much. I think the writer, too, Ecclesiastes, was right when he said that there is nothing new under the sun, and the Bible does open up our hearts and reveal to us our needs.

[2 : 23] And Jesus here is speaking to his disciples, his learners, and we're the same. We're no different. We come to God's word, and we come to his truth as learners. We recognize his word as having authority over us, as being God breathed for us.

So I would like to look at this passage today, particularly using as a kind of fulcrum, verse 5, because it links together all the different sections of this chapter.

The Apostles said to the Lord, increase our faith. And we really find there that the Apostles have grasped exactly what Jesus has, and is going to say in terms of their relationship, because it's about faith.

And so I would like to look at these sections through that prism of our faith and our faith in Jesus. Jesus is communicating and teaching us about the nature of faith, and our faith in him as Christians and his disciples' faith in him as well.

And I'm very interested in the way Jesus does that, because I strive to be a communicator. And what's fantastic about Jesus is his ability to communicate truth using word and action pictures.

[3 : 43] That's how he chooses to get across theological truth here, using pictures, very vivid word and action pictures. There's an action picture with the miracle healing of the lepers.

And there's some word pictures, some illustrations that he uses in his teaching as well, and we're going to look at that today, and some of these pictures.

And in his description or in his unfolding of faith, we recognize in the first place, as he speaks about it in verses 1 to 4, where he talks about not causing anyone else to sin, better uses this picture. You

know, you'd be better to have a millstone put around your neck and thrown into the deepest part of the sea. Very vivid and quite stark and a resting picture.

And then he says, you know, also about forgiveness in that first four verses. And through that picture that he's giving, he's reminding us that faith and our faith is seriously important. It's seriously important our faith. I think the illustration he uses gets that across to us very much. And within that little section, Christ makes some presuppositions, doesn't he?

[5 : 03] He presupposes certain truths, which is good for us because he's God. And if he makes these presuppositions, we don't need to question them.

We don't need to kind of take one step back and work out whether they're right or wrong. We can know that his presuppositions are right because he's God. So there's no debate over them and there's no question marks.

What are his presuppositions in this first section? Well, the first is that sin is real, absolute. It's a definable reality in our lives. He just speaks about sin as a reality in our lives, something real. And we know from here and from throughout Scripture that that is why Jesus has come. He's come to deal with that barrier between ourselves and God, our lack of love for God and our lack of love for one another, summing up all of the law that we break.

And the fundamental need that we have in our life is to have that core reality dealt with, both personally. And it's the fundamental reality of evil in our world is a rebellion against God.

[6 : 17] So we have this amazing presupposition that he makes. We don't need to argue about the reality of sin because Christ just accepts that it's there. But he also presupposes that as Christians, our actions affect other Christians.

That's another presupposition that he makes here, doesn't he? At the beginning when he says things that cause people to sin are bound to come. But woe to that person through whom they come. Then he goes on to say, if you cause one of these little ones to sin, it's a disaster.

So he's presupposing that our actions, that our faith, that our belief, that how we live will affect other people. And we are not to be very careful that they don't affect other people negatively.

So Christ is making another presupposition there. That how we live affects other people, especially within the Christian household. And his third presupposition is that we are part of a family as Christians.

He says in verse 3, if your brother sins, rebuke him and if he repents, forgive him. And that language of family is the language that Jesus uses again and again.

[7 : 34] That is Christians by nature, by grace, by our rebirth into his family. We are part of a functioning family. And we have responsibilities to one another, to forgive one another.

So he makes these presuppositions and I just wanted to make them quickly. But this first section reminds us that our faith is seriously important. Because Jesus here links faith and sin.

Now that's an interesting link. It's not a common link, but it's a very interesting one. Because we would maybe want to separate these two out. But they can't be separated and he doesn't separate them.

He links intrinsically our behaviour and our potential to sin with our faith and how our faith deals with that. What we like sometimes to think is I'm interested in faith and I like to consider faith because that's a nice kind of clean, polished subject.

But I'm not so keen to link it with sin and I don't like the whole concept of sin. But Jesus links the two very closely together here, very powerfully. And he reminds us that as people of faith we have to watch ourselves.

[8 : 50] He says, so watch yourself in verse 3. He wants us to watch our lives so that we don't cause other people, especially children or people who are young Christians, to stumble and fall.

So that we don't cause anyone else to sin. And he regards that as so important that he gives us this picture. Now can I stress, this is a picture that he gives.

Jesus is speaking to people who often dealt in pictures and they would know that this was a picture. It's better, he says, 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.

This is a picture where Jesus is clearly stating, in flashing verbal lights, that it's serious. Please know that your behaviour and how you live as a Christian is serious if it causes other people to stumble and fall and sin.

It's not a literal thing he's describing here. It's using verbal, using visual exaggeration to get across a very important point, that it's serious, how we live is really serious.

[10:07] And it's important that we, in our faith, we don't cause other people to stumble by our understanding of a relationship with God. So it's the importance of being alert.

We need to watch ourselves, how we're living in relationship. But that faith also involves honesty, or a faith in Christ. Your brother sins, rebuke him and if he repents, forgive him.

And here again Jesus is speaking about faith in the context of community and accountability. We were discussing the whole idea of rebuke on Sunday night, the fellowship was very helpful.

And what you recall from this is that it's not about being a snitch here. It's not about being a super grass and pointing out people's mistakes and faults and failings.

This is Jesus speaking in the context of the intimacy of family, of a loving family of your brother, your sister. And it's this whole concept of our faith taking us into a relationship with other Christians that is intimate and loving.

[11:17] And if your brother offends you, your natural brother or sister, for example, offends you, and you love them, then if they're doing something you know is damaging to them and you, then the best thing to do is to face up to it, is it not?

It's not just to hide from it or to run away from it or to bury it, but it's to face up to it because you love them and they're doing something that's not helpful for them and it's hurtful to you.

And so we face it, we don't walk away from it and we don't bear a grudge over it. But it involves this honesty with one another, where we care for other people and if people offend us or if they sin against us, as we are told here, and we deal with that and they are repentant, then we walk on.

And so again, what's very interesting here is that faith is not conceived of or described in private and personal terms, which is very popular today.

I have my faith, I have my belief in God, I'll work it out my own way, and it's an intensely personal and private thing. Jesus grounds faith here very strongly in community.

[12:30] Grounds it very strongly in Christian community and family among God's people and also in the recognition that our faith is in private because it affects other people.

If we sin and it affects other Christians, if we cause other people to sin, it's not this intensely private thing. It is personal and private, but it also has this important aspect because we know that we are accountable to one another and to God.

And within that, the seriously important truth is the importance of forgiveness. Where we have that relationship because we have been forgiven, that other people need to be the recipients of our forgiveness.

However often they come in repentance, they are forgiven. The act of grace. So we have faith here that Jesus explains in seriously important terms, but also he explains it as something that's uniquely dutiful.

And again, I think this is an unpopular concept today, the idea of duty in relationship with the living God. And he goes on in verses 7 to 10 to speak about the humility of a servant who wouldn't expect, we're told, to sit at his master's table.

[13:57] Again, we struggle with this whole vision, this picture, because we don't really live in an age and generation as such where there's servants and masters. But the servant wouldn't expect to come when the master comes into the field.

He wouldn't expect the servant to sit with him at the table and discuss the affairs of the day, and then they'd wash the dishes together. Afterwards, that wasn't really the way it was, master's servant. And so we need to remember that's the picture and the concept.

It is different, but then again, if we could adapt it, you wouldn't expect if you were the cleaner of a big company to sit in the boardroom for the discussions with the board, would you? Or you know, I was at Hunter Bailey's graduation on Thursday, and it's in the magnificent McEwen Hall, and it's very grand, and everything's very formal, and there's a procession in with all the professors and the deans of the faculties and the principal, and they all come very efficiently and efficiently, and they all sit at the front facing the audience and the undergraduates and those that are getting their degrees. And then there's various employees of the university who are dressed up to the hilt, but whose duty is simply to make sure that the undergraduates move at the right time to have their heads doffed at the important point, so that it all runs very smoothly.

And you wouldn't expect these employees who stand at the end of the corridors to take their seats with the professors or to make a speech, because you know, there's something very different there. [15:35] They've got a different duty to perform. Well, that's important. It doesn't make them any lesser people, but it's just different. And Jesus is linking this picture of a servant who recognizes his duty with our responsibility as Christians in relation to faith.

He's talked about faith being seriously important, and now he talks about faith and duty. And when we see it through the prism of the cross, it's not a problem for us, because we see Jesus Christ, who gave himself in servitude for our sins, in great love.

That is the prism through which we can understand all these truths for ourselves as we apply his picture of faith to our own lives.

There's no pride in our lives. When we understand the magnitude of God the Creator, emptying himself of his glory and taking the form of a servant, and then dying on a cross, facing ours in and our hell and God's wrath, because he loves us and gifts us his salvation, it's the most magnificent picture of grace and goodness.

And so what Jesus is saying here, that our faith is linked to that, what does he say at the end there of that section? So you also, when you've done everything you were told to do, should say we are unworthy servants, we have only done our duty.

[17:09] Does that seem very harsh to you that somehow we have this concept in our Christian lives? Well, can I just unpack it a little bit? Because it means two, primarily two things.

The first is, it's a reminder to us that God can never owe us anything. That's what's very important. The word unworthy really has the whole, it doesn't mean worthless, okay?

It doesn't mean that at all. When he talks about being unworthy servants, it kind of means that there's no gain that we can yield to God for what we're doing.

In other words, our service to him is not in order to earn favor with him, or curry favor with him even. God will never be indebted to us is what it means by our service of him.

It means that we can never have a claim on God, so that our service isn't that we come to God and say, look at what I've done, A, B, C or D, you owe me God. It can never be that.

[18:15] In that sense, we are unworthy, I think the A, B used to have it, is unprofitable servants, which gives us more of the idea of gain and profit, I guess. But the reality is we are forever indebted as Christians to God.

God will never be indebted to us, which is where the picture of gift and the picture of service comes in, because we are serving him, and God will never owe us.

But what's also very important is a kind of more positive aspect of that, which is it's the least we can do. If a servant who is duty bound to do these things for his Master does them without seeking thanks or without seeking praise or profit, how much more reason do we have?

Because we have a Master who loves us and who frees us and who redeems us and who brings us into his family and who adopts us and who inherits us and who gives us all things.

So we have a great... it's the least we can do. So here is the concept of faith being uniquely dutiful, because it's a privilege for us to be a servant.

[19:32] It's the least we can do, you know, when someone is giving you something great that you can't pay back, and then maybe a few weeks later they ask you for a favour, kind of, ask you to...

and you say, hey, man, it's the least I can do. You know that, don't you? It's the least I can do. And you willingly do it. You realise you're absolutely indebted to them forever, and you'll probably never be able to pay them back so happily.

You'll say, look, my friend, it's the least I can do for you. And it's also the attitude of love, isn't it? I think I've used this illustration before here. But when my dad was dying in the hospice, you know, in Carstow you had that little pink stick, which you dipped into water, which you could dab his lips with because they were dry.

You know, a meaningless, servile task. It's the least I can do. It's the least we can do for people we love. The least task that we do in Christ's name, we do it because we love Him, and because we owe Him eternally for our life and for our future.

And so this attitude of duty is not to be seen as a burden or a weight, but a privilege, an absolute privilege, duty fuelled by grace.

[20:54] It's a pleasure. For us it's easy. My yoke is light. My burden is easy, Jesus says. Come to me. It's easy to serve me when we recognise it through the prism of grace.

How often for us, let's be honest, how often for me and how often for you is our service for Christ a bind, our service to Christ and maybe His church and obedience to His word.

Is it something that's a drag that we do dutifully with a grudge and with a grumpy face? How often is it seen as a favour?

I'm doing a favour for the church here. I'm giving them the use of my gifts, and it's a favour to the church, and maybe subconsciously, God, you owe me now. I've served you hard this week.

You owe me. And we have completely lost sight of grace and of the magnitude of grace and of the marvel of the Saviour, Jesus Christ, and we've stopped looking at our Christianity through the prism of the cross, and it's become something that, I don't know, we're intellectually or pre-suppositional from our point of view.

[22 : 09] Uniquely dutiful. So faith is seriously important in how we interact with each other. It's also uniquely dutiful. But faith, and this is really linked to the last picture, is a response of gratitude.

And having spoken here, and it's interesting that quite a lot of the commentators, when they look at this passage, question the links between the various sections. I think there's very clear links here.

Very clear between all of these, they're not random sections. We have very clear links here between what the disciples are asking about faith, the pictures Jesus is giving, and then the actual miracle.

And the miracle here is on his way to Jerusalem. We have these 10 lepers that Jesus cleanses, and yet only one of them comes back to give thanks.

And that person is the most unlikely of all 10 to come back, certainly in the eyes of the listeners, because the person is a Samaritan who the Jews hated and didn't get on with, and who were religiously unorthodox.

[23 : 23] And Jesus, in a sense, is just inverting everything beautifully again, isn't he? Saying those sometimes who ought most to give thanks, because they have most privileges and were covenantal in their upbringing, and in their knowledge and in their truth, the Jews people, even though they were lepers, didn't return to Jesus to give thanks.

But the Samaritan did, he returned to give thanks. And that is a great mark of his understanding of what Jesus had done, the healing that Jesus had worked for him.

And in this miracle, this picture that is a miracle, we also see, because it's very real, is that Jesus is disappointed by the lack of thankfulness of people he thought ought to know better.

Where are they? Where are the other nine, he said? He's looking for thanksgiving from them, and it doesn't come, and that disappoints him.

And that's very important, isn't it? As we reaffirm the teaching of grace and gratitude, the genuine faith in our lives will always respond with praise and worship, and gratitude. One of them, when he saw him, he came back, praising God in a loud voice, throwing himself at Jesus' feet, and thanked Him.

[24 : 53] And that was faith at work in his life, because his understanding had been transformed by grace. He'd been healed, and he'd been redeemed.

And for us, again, the motivation is knowing what Jesus has achieved for us once for all on the cross, with all its power and with all its glory.

And I've asked in the notes three questions throughout it, why, why, why? It's because of the cross. It's the prism through which we can live our lives and we can understand faith. Our faith linked to our knowledge of being healed, being healed by Jesus Christ from sin and sickness.

Faith linked to this transformation that He has brought into our thinking, into our living, into our submission, into our attitudes, into our compassion, into the way we think of other people.

It's a whole new outlook for every moment of our lives from the heart out, so that faith is linked very much here to worship and to thanksgiving and gratitude, and they are all linked in together.

[26 : 05] And very often I think we think of worship as something we come to participate, or something we come to receive from. I didn't get much out of that worship.

I didn't get much from it. Whereas in reality, faith in its Christ-centeredness is skipping towards Him in worship to return to Him our thanks.

It comes from grateful hearts. It is a heartfelt worship, not that we receive from the outside like a meal, but something that is just from our hearts, that is an expression of our thanksgiving.

And that of course not just in a formal worship service like this, but Romans 12 speaks about our lives being living sacrifices worship, so that we say in our lives when we are serving Jesus, it's the

least I can do.

It's the least I can do, and it's an attitude of gratitude that we have. It transforms our thinking and our service and our willingness and our commitment and our obedience and our submission to Him. [27 : 18] And that is very healthy to be thankful. Who was it, there was some famous old person? Well, I don't know, he wasn't old at the time, but I mean, it was a long time ago, so if he was still alive he'd be very old.

I've said, I've forgotten it, it's something about a thankless child being like something really bad. I'll remember it and I'll tell you it next week.

But it was talking about generations ago, I didn't have it in my notes, the awfulness of a thankless child. And as parents, as children we know how horrible it is to be thankless, and as parents we know it as well.

And as Christians we should know that. That a thankless child, Christ, where are the other nine, he says?

Where are they? Where are the people that should be returning to me with lives of them? It's the least I can do. Where are they?

[28 : 21] Because sometimes what we've done is we've raised ourselves to the principles position. We've raised ourselves to the masters position. We've raised ourselves to the boardroom position.

We've looked eyeball to eyeball with God and says, I'm equal with you. I've got nothing with which to give thanks for. You owe me. We're on a par here, God.

And he says, no, that isn't how it is. By faith we see things differently. And faith sees ourselves and our fellow Christians and the way we live. It's not just that absolutely private personal individual thing.

No one has a right to speak about or challenge. Jesus Christ gives us a great picture of faith here. And I finish with what I believe is the core verse here in verse five, where the apostles say to the Lord, increase our faith.

Why is that the case? Because when we look at these challenges, I hope you say, because I certainly say, that is impossible.

[29 : 30] Please increase my faith or please give me faith because it's not something I can work up on my own. This is absolutely counter to the way I live or the way I think or the way I am.

And so this great teaching reminds us that we need God. And the apostles response was absolutely right.

Increase our faith, Lord. They went to Him for more faith because they recognized that He was the one who would give it. And why am I assured of that?

Well, because of the other picture Jesus gives here. He gives the picture of the millstone and He gives the visual picture of the miracle. But He also gives the verbal picture of the faith being as small as a mustard seed.

So you can say to this mulberry tree, be uprooted and planted in the seed and it will obey you. Now that isn't an injunction for Jesus for you all to go down to the meadows and see if you can uproot one of the trees into the fourth to fourth to see how great your faith is.

[30 : 31] Can I do it? Have I really tried? It's not about that. It's not about having the faith to do daft and kind of insignificant or not insignificant, but things that are not useful.

It's a picture. It's a picture. It's a picture of the impossibility of what faith is naturally. Because, you know, the mustard seed was the smallest of all seeds.

And apparently the mulberry tree wasn't a particularly big tree, but it had incredibly strong and wide-ranging and deep roots. So it was one of the hardest trees in the world to actually uproot. Maybe for a JCB, but not for a mustard seed. Because it was tiny and tiny. And it was basically what Jesus is saying, it's impossible. What you're asking to do is impossible, naturally.

He's absolutely right, because that is the case. We need Him. It's impossible to believe without Him. It's impossible to be humble without Him. It's impossible to love Him without Him.

[31 : 38] Because He says we're spiritually dead without Him. It's impossible to get from that place of intellectual belief to trust, to cross that Rubicon. Without Him, we need Him to do that.

It's impossible to do these things in this chapter, to be forgiving, to be careful, to be a servant, to be thankful, without Him. It's impossible for us, because it's not natural to us.

And Jesus is reminding us that we are realigning ourselves to Him, and to His grace, and to His goodness, and to His gift. And that is good.

God help me, He says, increase my faith. And I suppose, if we look forward to chapter 18 verse 27, where it's verbalized, Jesus says, what is impossible with men is possible with God.

And as you see the reality, what is impossible for us, is not impossible for God. And that's where our hope, and our grace, and our goodness, and our motivation lies, that we come to Him, and for the impossibilities of faith that we can't reach, that we can't earn, that we can't make.

[32 : 51] He simply wants us to go to Him and say, Lord, increase our faith. And can I say something just in conclusion here? This isn't really about this last section. It isn't about how much faith we have.

You know, because there's some people who will say, maybe if you've prayed about something and there hasn't been an answer, or you don't think there's been, or certainly not been the answer, you won.

They'll say, well, maybe it's because you just don't have enough faith. And the pressure's all on you again. Am I not got enough faith? Is God not answering me?

Because I haven't got enough faith, as if it's up to me, and as if I've been mistaken. That's not again what He's saying here. It's not so much about the bigness of our faith, so that God responds to that, but rather it's not about great faith in God, it's about us having faith in a great God.

Do you see the difference? It's not about us having what we think is, hey, I've got a great faith, God, don't use me. But it's about us having a faith, which is kind of not measurable, but it's a faith in a great God, rather than an impotent, hopeless God.

[34 : 04] And that's what's important, that's a quote, by the way, from Leon Morris. It's a very apposite and very good quote. We recognize that, that our faith is in them, the God for whom nothing is impossible.

So maybe say here today, and I will not become a Christian, or I can't become a Christian, I can't move forward. Exactly right, exactly right.

But what is impossible with us is possible with God. Is God who will gift us that faith to believe? And that is really thrilling, it is very freeing.

Because if we don't have that understanding, we remain enslaved to our own understandings, and our own smallness, and our own intellectual capabilities, and our own gifts, and our own talents.

And of course God uses all that, but we use them in a much greater and freer way when we say, Lord, increase our faith. I'm needy, and I need you.

[35 : 07] So with that great picture of faith, unpacked in a little bit in these verses, if you have any questions about that passage or this section, then please stay behind afterwards, and we'll have a short discussion together.

If you want to get a coffee and bring it up, then please do so. May God bless His wordless bow or heads briefly in prayer. Lord God, we ask and pray that you would help us to come to you humbly, to realign our thinking, and to recognise the freedom that you offer, and the freedom of the gift of faith.

We rejoice in this faith that is pictured here by you. And we pray that we would find ourselves challenged, and excited, and moulded by that in our own lives, and that we might be set free so to do.

Help us, Lord, to trust in you and to be diligent servants, and may we look at our life constantly through the prism of the cross, and have that freedom to say, well, Lord, it's the least I can do. And may that be the motivation for our service, knowing that we will never make you a debtor to us. And all we do is in gratitude.

[36 : 35] So may that be our motivation here as a congregation to be generous to each other, generous in our attitude to each other, in our judgment of one another, generous in our support of each other, in our forgiveness, in our community-spiritedness with each other, and also at a wider level.

And in our recognition of the place sin being dealt with in faith has. Lord God, the reminders of the seriousness of these things through the prism of the cross, for Jesus' sake.

Amen.