

Bible Study Guide: Week of 9-26-2022

1. Read through the passage below
2. Read my notes and commentary
3. Read the questions at the end and ponder or discuss with others

Pastor Andrew

Luke 17:5-10

⁵The apostles said to the Lord, “Increase our faith!” ⁶The 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. ⁷“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’? ⁸Would 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’? ⁹Do you thank the slave for doing what was commanded? ¹⁰So 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!’”

⁵The apostles said to the Lord, “Increase our faith!”

Interestingly, although Jesus addressed “the disciples” to begin chapter 17, here it is “the apostles” who ask Jesus to increase their faith. Although the two terms are sometimes used interchangeably and that may be the case here, the two terms are not synonyms. The term “disciples” (*mathetas* in Greek) means learners or pupils. Meanwhile, the term “apostles” (*apostoloi* in Greek) means delegates or messengers. In Luke, “apostles” refers most naturally to the two groups Jesus sent out to do his work and to go where he himself intended to go. This occurred in chapter 9 when the 12 were sent out and in chapter 10 when the 70 or 72 were sent out. It is these most intimate followers of Jesus who ask him to increase their faith here. They ask this in response to Luke 17:1-4 in which Jesus commanded them to avoid causing others to stumble, to rebuke sin, and to forgive repentant sinners. These tasks, evidently, were daunting to the apostles.

⁶The 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.

Jesus’ reply to their request is hardly satisfying. In Greek, it is grammatically challenging, as well. The first clause in Greek essentially reads, “Since you have faith the size of a mustard seed...” In other words, this is assumed to be a real condition. The second clause, however, is assumed to be contrary to fact: “you could say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea,’ (but you can’t) and it would obey you (but it won’t). The somewhat tortured grammar underscores the difficulty of this saying. The overall point seems to be that Jesus doesn’t believe that the apostles need any more faith than they already have. The apostles are thinking of faith in quantitative terms; Jesus is more concerned with the quality of faith than quantity. Faith is that which can do the seemingly impossible. If a miniscule grain no more than a millimeter wide would be enough to uproot and replant a towering tree, surely the faith the apostles have been given is enough to guide, correct, and forgive each other.

⁷“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’? ⁸Would 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’? ⁹Do you thank the slave for doing what was commanded? ¹⁰So 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!’”

This short parable seeks to explain the duties of discipleship. Just as a little faith is enough to do the work required of disciples, the work itself is not grandiose or unusual, either. Jesus portrays the duties of discipleship as those

things that are expected of a laborer, not as anything “above and beyond” ordinary. Those looking for extra gold stars in heaven for living especially faithful lives may find themselves disappointed. Though we may find the imagery of slavery disturbing here, notice that Jesus shifts the roles in the parable. The apostles are first told to imagine something they already knew about in the world—“Suppose you have a slave...how should he/she act?” Yet then the twist is that Jesus tells them that *they* are, in fact, “slaves” in the kingdom. To quote Luther, “A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject of all, subject to all.” We take on the role of slave to one another and to the world, just as Christ did in laying down his life for us all. The term “worthless” here can also (and better, in this case) be translated as “unworthy.”

Discussion/Reflection Questions:

- 1. Have you ever prayed or asked as the apostles ask here: “Increase my faith?” What prompted your request?**
- 2. Why do you think Jesus uses the image of a mustard seed and a mulberry tree here to explain the life of faith?**
- 3. In what ways can we function as servants to others?**