

My Brother's Keeper, Part 7

Luke 17:5-10

The second observation, here, about what Jesus says is that faith is not about doing miracles. Faith is not about doing miracles. It's about knowing and doing God's will, which unleashes divine power. Faith is not about doing miracles, but knowing and doing God's will to unleash God's power.

Look again in verse 6. "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." And you say, Sure sounds like he's promising them miracles. I don't know what that is, but it looks miraculous to me. I don't know what that is, but that looks supernatural. Nothing natural about that. I know, I know. And I thought about that before writing down, faith is not about doing miracles, so trust me; in just a minute here, you'll see it.

There are on two separate occasions earlier in Jesus' ministry, where he used similar language as this about faith. You see, in Matthew 17:20, the, the, Apostles failed to exercise or cast out a demon and Jesus explained the problem. He said, "If you have faith like a grain of mustard seed, you'll say to this mountain." And what's the mountain a picture of? An entrenched demon that won't get out. It's not going to move. "You'll say to this mountain, move from here to there. It'll move and nothing will be impossible for you." So, with faith, cast out demons.

Later in the ministry in Matthew 21:20, the Apostles marveled when Jesus cursed a fig tree on one day they came back and the thing was completely shriveled up. They marveled and he said, "Truly I say to you, if you have faith and don't doubt, you'll not only do what's been done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain be taken up and thrown into the sea, it'll happen." Very similar language, isn't it?

At my house, I don't know about yours, but at my house, Cottonwood roots shoot out everywhere and little Cottonwood saplings are growing up in the middle of my lawn. Impossible to

eradicate. Totally annoying. Because no matter how much you mow them down or pull them up, we've done both, they resist your will, they defy you. They exhaust your efforts. They continue to grow, reproduce, and drive you absolutely bonkers. Is this your experience? It's mine.

This Mulberry tree is like that. Vast invasive root system. Tree that's been growing its root system, like this for several centuries and to command this noxious thing to be uprooted, be quite the feat. Imagine, though, the satisfaction of taking the next step. If you're able to uproot that Cottonwood and then plant it in the heart of the sea. That's what I'd like to do with all those Cottonwoods. I'm picturing that right now, a few Cottonwoods, I'd like to uproot, plant in the heart of the sea, and drown them.

What Jesus has described here, I believe, is intended to illustrate exactly the kind of concern that the Apostles were recognizing in obeying Jesus' command to rebuke sin, to uproot sin, and cast it out of their midst, and then to forgive a repeated offender. He's acknowledging here their concern. Because the Apostles, they're right to see these relational

issues, issues of sin and offense, issues of bitterness and resentment, hurt, sorrow, historical offenses. They are very perceptive to see, humanly speaking, these issues are exceedingly difficult. They seem totally eradicable, totally irresolvable.

Some, sis, situations are so complex, some offenses so historic, going back many, many years, it's this entangled web of sin and hurt, intertwining, intricately woven roots of bitterness, all wrapped around the heart. On a human level, it's just totally impossible to uproot the bitterness, the anger, the resentment, the hatred. It kind of would be easier to extricate the Mulberry tree and uproot and plant it in the middle of the sea. Frankly, in some cases that would be easier and more desirable, then dealing with the human sin.

But Jesus is clear to say, by simple obedience to what he's commanded, here in this text, verses 3 and 4. Also in texts like Matthew 18, 15 to 20, which we covered last time. Other texts, as well, that contribute to the idea of rebuking sin, confronting it, dealing with the sin in the body, dealing with sin with people.

I've watched this time, and time, and time again as God unscrews the inscrutable. Where there was once only darkness, he brings light. Where there was once only resentment, bitterness, seething, and even murderous anger, he dissipates that sinful anger and grants forgiveness, that sets people free. Totally changes their demeanor.

Where once there was nothing but hatred, and it all reinforced by years, and years, and decades, centuries of offenses, he causes love to cut through it all and banish the hatred, and prevail and show his glory and his power and his grace. That's what forgiveness is. It sets the captive free.

Only when we forgive one another, which we can't do, by, apart from God's forgiving us first. But forgiveness has this very power to eradicate every bitter root. Moses commanded something similar back in Deuteronomy 29:18. He said, "Beware, lest there be among you a man or woman or clan or tribe whose heart is turning away today from the Lord our God to go and serve the gods of those nations."

"Beware lest there be among you a root bearing, poisonous and bitter fruit, one who, when he hears the words of this sworn covenant, blesses himself in his heart, saying, 'I shall be safe, though I walk in the stubbornness of my heart.'" I shall be safe. I'm good with God. I've got a relationship with him on my own terms. Don't get into my business. "This will lead," away to the, "lead to the sweeping away of moist and dry alike," Moses warns.

The writer to the Hebrews is probably alluding to the same image, alluding to the same text. He writes this in Hebrews 12:15. "See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no root of bitterness' springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled." What's going to accomplish this? How do we "beware lest there be among you a root bearing, poisonous, and bitter fruit." How do we see to it that, "no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no 'root of bitterness' springs up; causes trouble; by many become defiled."

Look back at verses 3 and 4. "Pay attention to yourselves." Very simple. Be on guard, be watchful. Pay attention. "If your brother sins, rebuke him." Simple. "If he repents, forgive him, and if he sins against you," like this turns personal, "and repeated seven times in the day, turns to you seven times saying, 'I repent', you must forgive him."

Forgiveness is powerful. So, if this seems hard. If it seems extremely difficult, beyond your own ability, even an impossibility, you don't need more faith to be obedient. Jesus says, you just need to exercise the faith that you have. You just need to remember the power of God. Do what the Lord commands. You'll look back and see that God has done through you what you thought was absolutely impossible. What could not happen.

Well, this brings us to a final illustration that Jesus uses here in verses 7 to 10, so we'll call this a second point. First point was, remember the power of God. And here's the second point, remember the duty of servants. Remember the duty of servants. Remember your duty as a servant, and by the way, the word is *doulos*, so it's slave. Remember your duty as slaves.

When we remember our duty to serve the Lord through obedience to his word, this is how he accomplishes remarkable works of power through simple faith, simple obedience. In this illustration, from verses 7 to 10, Jesus is using imagery that's familiar to the people of the ancient Near East. It's the relationship of servants to masters.

Actually, the word, as I said, is *doulos*, so it's a master slave relationship. And when he comes to verse 7, he portrays for the crowd, for the Apostles themselves, the disciples who were listening, the entire crowd, he portrays to them what's ridiculous and then in verse 7, what's normal. So first the ridiculous to them. "Will any one of you who has a servant plowing or keeping sheep, say to him when he's come in from the field, come at once and recline at the table." No, no one listening would think that's reasonable.

Everyone listening would think that's ridiculous and Jesus is quick to rectify the scenario in the next breath. "Will he not rather say to him, 'Prepare supper for me dress properly,



serve me while I eat and drink, and afterward you will eat and drink.'" And the whole crowd goes, yeah, that's more like it. That's exactly how it would go.

We tend to think of servant, master, slave, master relationships through the prism of American chattel slavery. The crime of kidnapping people from other places or participating in a kidnapping enterprise, criminal enterprise, buying those people as slaves, off the mark, off the market and then using them and grinding them down and destroying their lives. That's how we tend to think of it, because of the continued sense of consciousness we have about the sin of American slavery.

But that is not the slavery that's being described here. Jesus is not portraying some wealthy millionaire billionaire landowner who sits around and eats grapes all day. This is typical Middle Eastern household described here. Typical household, normal way of living in the ancient Near East. Just an ordinary home of modest means, they would own a slave or two, employ a servant or two, to help with normal chores around the, the, house or the farm or whatever it is.

You may remember the sons of Zebedee, James and John. Their father had a fishing business that they were due to inherit; they worked for. They had hired servants with them in the fishing vessel, Mark 1:20. So, he's, Jesus just describing things the way they are. The Apostles to whom he's speaking, for the wider group of disciples, for the ordinary folks in the crowd, this is just normal, everyday life.

An ordinary man owned a slave or two or he employed a hired servant. Not so he could, get back, kick back and relax. Take it easy. He did so to increase his productivity. He's out there with them on the farm as well. He's out there in the field. He's, he's out there tending the sheep, just like they are. He's out there shearing the sheep. He's out there doing the hard work. He does his own chores, as they do their own chores.

This guy might not even be a landowner. He might be renting the land he's farming. He might be renting the land on which his sheep are grazing. By the way, think about this, farming, shepherding, serving meals, all these are metaphors for

ministry. What does the farmer do? Plows up the fallow ground. He plants seed. When you see his little things come up, he starts to water and provide nutrients, and at the right time he harvests.

Shepherding: That's a very clear, by the way, farming is a very clear metaphor for ministry. Same thing with shepherding. Shepherds are to protect the flock. Guard the flock. Lead the flock. Guide the flock. Feed the flock. Nourish the flock. Take care of all their wounds. Keep them out of trouble. Shepherding is amazing metaphor for the ministry.

Serving meals, also used here, eating and drinking, another metaphor for ministry. In fact, that's exactly what I am or aim to be, is a good waiter. I just want to bring a good meal to you and not screw it up on the way. Just serve you the food. Let you eat from what Jesus has taught us. I'm just a waiter. I'm just a server. I'm a servant. Farming, shepherding, serving meals, all these are metaphors for ministry.

In any case, when the work day is over, as Jesus is picturing here, a slave is also the cook. He's also the server. So, he moves from outside chores to inside chores. Masters and slaves are not returning to the house, as the sun is setting, when it's dark. That's not the picture here. This is the late afternoon meal. This is probably around 3:00 PM. Sun's burning hot, blazing hot. It's a great time to be indoors.

It's Kenneth Bailey who says, quote, "We're not dealing with harsh hours imposed by an unfeeling master, but rather the normal expectations of a relatively short day's chores." That's the picture here. So, it's totally normal for the master to say, without thinking twice about it, prepare supper for me dress properly. Serve me while I eat and drink. After your work, you'll eat and drink.

In fact, it's so common he wouldn't even have to say that. Jesus is just drawing this to the attention of the Apostles. But now in verse 9. Jesus draws us to his point with this question. Does he thank the servant because he did what was commanded? Does he thank him? I mean, we think, you know, all politeness a

thank you is appropriate. Hey, thanks for the hard work out there in the field.

But that's not what this is talking about. Our English translations all say it this, does he thank them. But the word here is actually the word *charis*. The word means grace, favor, benefit. So just to unpack this a bit more and get underneath, the, the text, here, the language.

The sense of the expression is, after the servant comes in doing his work outside, and now he comes in to do inside work. The sense of the expression is the master doesn't owe favor to the servant, does he? Because he did what was commanded. Is there any credit due to the servant just because he's done his job? Is the master somehow indebted to him just because he did what was expected?

I don't know if you're finding this, but I am, as I go into restaurants and coffee shops, even some retail stores. I don't know if you see this, but you give your order to the person at the counter. It's the person who's been hired by the

employer to stand at the counter and take your order and then fulfill your order. They get an hourly wage to do this.

And then after you give your order, you wait patiently. You receive what's ordered. Obviously, before you walk away with items in a bag, you need to square up accounts. You need to pay for your order. So put your credit card in the little reader to process your payment. After this little spinning thing, on the, on the screen, what happens next?

The counter individual says to you, as if this is totally normal, as if this is always the way it was, spins the little reader around to you and says, "Just need you to fill out the rest of the screen for me." What's on the little screen? Suggested tip amounts. It's basically, what Jesus is picturing here, a tip for doing your job.

The servant who does his job, who's connected to the master, who benefits from food, and home, and shelter, protection, safety. His family, often of these slaves, are totally taken care of for life, generations. The families blend

together and join together with, with, love and concern and protection. It's not the American shadow slavery picture. Don't picture that!

Picture what the Old Testament describes, in controlling the institution. There's a love and a kindness. Think, master and slave; us to God. He's, our master. How does he treat us? We're his slave. How are we treated? Do we lack for anything? The servant who does his job, he's owed no special reward. His master is not somehow indebted to him, because he did his job and didn't get a tip.

And this brings us to verse 10, so you also, when you've done all that you were commanded, say, "We are unworthy servants. We've only done what was our duty." You'll notice in verse 9 and verse 10, how Jesus repeats some of the terms. Verse 9, "The servant did what was commanded." Verse 10, you've, "when you've done all you were commanded." And again, at the end of verse 10, "We've only done what was our duty."

The word, *duty*, is the word, the verb *opheilo*, which, that which one should do. What one ought to do. That is to say, what's commanded. In each case, a verb of, doing, is tied to what's been commanded. So, there's a command, there's a hearing the command, and there's a doing of the command. Doing what the master says, that does not merit some special commendation. That's just what's expected.

In the servant's response, in verse 10, "We're unworthy slaves, unworthy servants." I'm gonna spare you the details of all the lexical issues there in verse 10, but some translations have them saying, and then you can tell there's a struggle here on how to translate this word. It's the word, *acheiros*, but it's we're unworthy slaves, we're unprofitable, or this one, good for nothing slaves. It's not true. It's not true. If they've done all they were commanded, there's some profit that's been gained for the master.

I mean the master's, not just telling them to go and take this pile of rocks and move it over there, make small rocks out of bigger rocks, and then move the pile again. He's not just, he didn't have them to do worthless stuff. He has them to make a



profit. So, they're not worthless, they're not unprofitable, they're not good for nothing.

There's an even worse translation that says, we're miserable slaves, which totally distorts, the a, the sense. It's the Syriac and Arabic versions, which get a little closer to the Middle Eastern culture and the idioms, and they get this one right when they translate this expression, "We claim no special merit." That's what they're saying, we claim no special merit. We're just doing our job. We're servants to whom nothing is owing. We're servants with no need. That's literally the translation of, *acheiros*. *Cheiros* meaning, need, and 'a' being an alpha privative that negativizes it, no need. We have no need. We're good.

Back to Jesus. What's he saying to his Apostles in particular? What do we learn as the larger group of disciples listening in? He pictures the Apostles here just doing their duty, just doing their job, doing what he's commanded, rebuking the sin, forgiving the sinner, and if anyone were to call it to their attention, they would respond by saying, what we're just servants to whom nothing is owing. We've just done our duty.

That's how the Christian life is lived, isn't it, trust and obey. We simply do what Jesus commanded, which is our normal duty, as slaves, of our Lord Jesus Christ. And in one sense this is mundane stuff. It's unremarkable. It's routine obedience. The duty of a slave to render obedience to his master. That's just the definition of the relationship.

And yet through simple, rather routine obedience to Christ, you know what God does through us, by his Spirit, because of his word; he does what appears to be utterly and totally impossible. That's Luke 17:1 to 10. God does the remarkable, through our unremarkable, but consistent obedience to his word.

After addressing the Pharisees in chapter 16, verses 14 to 31. Jesus turned back to his disciples. He'd been teaching them before the Pharisees interrupted him, and he was teaching them, in Luke 16:1 to 13. Pharisees interrupted and he had to turn his attention to them. He did. Taught them.

He comes back in chapter 17 verses 1 and 2, and assures his disciples that divine justice is coming upon stumbling blocks. But that shouldn't be a cause for your rejoicing and becoming arrogant, but rather fear should put them on guard, to identify friend from foe, in their midst. Should teach them to root out any cause for stumbling, in verses 3 and 4.

Disciples, the Apostle's response reveals their concern about doing what Jesus has commanded them to do. "Increase our faith," verse 5. They've got to avoid causing a little one to stumble. Avoid those people coming in. They gotta deal with that. And they gotta keep forgiving an offending brother. Someone who repeatedly offends them, offends them personally.

One has to be, at the same time, hard in guarding against false teachers and bad influences, and very soft, so soft in being receptive and being forgiving to repeated offenses. And though that seems hard and difficult, at the end of the day, when they look back on their life, they'll just see it as routine, mundane, normal stuff.

This is the Christian life. And yet God has done the amazing. He's built that church. He's saved those people souls. He's caused this family to reconcile and come together. He's strengthened the weak. He's helped the faint hearted. He's built-up people in love. He's used forgiveness to cut the cords of bitterness and anger and hatred and totally wipes it away.

He does in a church what is amazing, bringing Jew and Gentile together, male and female, slave and free, brings them all together, as one people. Manifesting his power in his glory to unite, to teach these people to love one another, that becomes the badge of their very existence. God does the amazing. All of that, believe me, is more remarkable than taking a Mulberry tree and planting it in the ocean.

When we exercise simple faith. Through simple obedience. Just do what Jesus commands, treating him as our true master and we his servants, his slaves. God does what's absolutely remarkable, seemingly miraculous. Doing this, we do the duty of servants to trust and obey.