

# When Obedience Seems Impossible

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[0:00] Our Lord is on the throne, and yet he even now stoops to speak to us in Luke chapter 17, verses 1-10.

! So watch yourselves.

If your brother sins, rebuke him. And if he repents, forgive him. If he sins against you seven times in a day and seven times comes back to you and says, I repent, forgive him.

The apostle said to the Lord, increase our faith. He replied, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, be uprooted and planted in the sea, and it will obey you.

Suppose one of you had a servant plowing or looking after the sheep. Would he say to the servant when he comes in from the field, come along now and sit down to eat?

[1:18] Would he not rather say, prepare my supper? Get yourself ready and wait on me while I eat and drink. After that, you may eat and drink. Would he thank the servant because he did what he was told to do?

So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, we are unworthy servants. We have only done our duty.

Let's hear the word of God preached. What should you expect this morning from this passage, at least the way we'll meditate upon it this morning?

Well, you shouldn't expect a sermon on forgiving, rebuking, and forgiving. That's not the intent of this message.

That's how it started this day. The Lord and the disciples were speaking. The Lord was speaking to our disciples about being a stumbling block, making people sin, and then the need to rebuke people, even a brother who sins, and the need to forgive, and even forgive someone seven times a day.

[2:34] But you'll notice that after the disciples respond to our Lord and say, increase our faith, our Lord leaves the subject of forgiveness and rebuking and never mentions it again.

He talks about faith, but in a general way that would apply to any area of life, not just rebuking and forgiving. And then he gives a parable about a servant who's serving and comes in and he's tired and he still has to finish the rest of his duty.

And Jesus says, when you've done all that you were commanded, and that applies to everything, not just forgiving and rebuking, that we should say we've only done our duty.

So, as often is the case, our Lord saw something in the disciples' response when they said, increase our faith. Our Lord in his divine wisdom detected something wrong in their thinking which would keep them from forgiving seven times a day, but which would keep them from obeying in lots of ways.

And so, I want to talk to you this morning about when obedience seems impossible. Because wasn't that what was happening this day?

[3:50] Increase our faith for giving seven times a day. And the Lord gives a general teaching which will help us in any area. The first point.

Here's the first point. You mean, I have to do that? Or, if you don't like points like that, what God requires.

But, really, that's the way we say it. We don't say, is this what God requires? We say, you mean I have to do that? And this was the disciples' attitude this day when they heard the Lord say these words.

Imagine, if your brother sins against you seven times in the day and turns to you seven times saying, I repent, you must forgive him.

Can you imagine? One time, you feel really offended. You feel really hurt. He comes back and says, I'm sorry. Okay. The second time, he does it. The day. Wow.  
[4:54] He said he, he said he wouldn't do that again. You have to forgive him. The third time. The fourth. The fifth. The sixth time. Come on now.

Right? Isn't that what we feel like? And yet the Lord says to the disciples seven times and yet you must forgive him. And so that is what precipitates this response of the disciples.  
Lord, increase our faith. And let me see here. Does it have an exclamation point? Yes, it does. I think that's right. Whoever did the ESV, that's the way we should say it.  
Lord, increase our faith. In other words, you mean I have to do that? Go all of that way? Do all that you have commanded?

So I don't know what it might be for you. I can think of things for myself. But think of situations where for you obedience might seem impossible today.  
[5:59] Is it some difficult person that you must love? love? Is it some lust or ambition or habit that you must mortify?

Is it your tongue and what you say? Is it a problem of anger? is it becoming a man or woman of prayer?

Really becoming a man or woman of prayer? Is it going somewhere to serve Christ in a sacrificial way? A really challenging situation that you feel that God might be calling you to?  
is it enduring some physical suffering that you've had for a long time? Or maybe you know that you're going to have it from now on.

Do you really mean, Lord, that I have to stay single? Or do you really mean, Lord, that I have to endure this physical suffering with contentment until the end?

[7:12] Well, whatever it is, I think certainly you realize that the words of our Lord are going to apply to you because we all have these situations, don't we?

Where we want to say, Lord, increase my faith. You mean, I really have to do that? Second point, I'll never be able to do that.

Or, if you don't like that way to say it, how we come to a dead stop in our Christian life. Now, when we read the disciple of our Lord, and they make this response to the command to forgive seven times in a day, Lord, increase our faith.

We want to say at first, well, for once they said the right thing. You know how often they're really totally missing. But here they ask for faith. And don't we know that all obedience is by faith?

Hebrews 11, by faith Abraham obeyed going out and we have the tendency to say the first time, it's the only time in the gospels that they ask for something spiritual and inward.

[8:38] We want to say as they do in France, bravo. But our Lord is not happy with their response. And in fact, he sees things exactly the opposite from the way they do.

They are saying in effect, we can't do that until you give us something that you haven't given us so far. Increase our faith.

We need a faith that you have not given us and so really, it's only people of great faith that can do this thing. Jesus says in verse 6, and the Lord said, if you had faith like a grain of mustard seed, smallest faith possible, and you're still a Christian.

You see what he's saying? He's saying, I'm not, I don't agree with you at all. If you had faith like a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, be uprooted and planted into the sea, and it would obey you.

In other words, what seems impossible, you could do it. Disobedience, it seems impossible. what is happening here?

[10:02] And why does our Lord feel the need to correct the disciples' thinking? Have you ever been in that place where you think, I'm at a dead stop. I can't become more of a man of prayer, or a woman of prayer.

I can't overcome this ambition. I can't make this sacrifice or this change in my life. I can't love this difficult person because I don't have enough something from God.

And when we do that, do you know what we're really doing? We're shifting the responsibility for our disobedience to God. Aren't we? The Lord is saying, you need to do this, you must forgive, and the disciples turn around and say, you must give us something we don't have yet.

The problem's not us, it's you. it's what you haven't done. And, in effect, they are taking a reasonable, legitimate duty that's proper for them and that they can do with God's grace, present

grace, and they're turning it into an exploit for the spiritually elite, the great faith people. And it's very subtle because, you see, if you can turn any duty, loving that difficult person, becoming a man of prayer, a woman of prayer, overcoming that habit, if you can turn it in your mind into an exploit that, yeah, the spiritually elite do that, but I'm an ordinary Christian, you know what you've just done?

[11:42] You've delegitimized that duty. In other words, you've brought yourself out from underneath that duty and the lordship of Christ in that area, and you've said, yes, God requires that of the spiritual elite, but I'm not the spiritual elite, so it's not really something that God could really insist upon for me right now.

When he increases my faith, if ever he does, then I'll be able to do that. It's like if I walked into a room and I don't know how I got in this room, but anyway, the guy's saying, okay, young men, you need to show up tomorrow when we start our Navy SEAL training.

Five o'clock in the morning, and, you know, I know what Navy SEAL training is. I met a Navy SEAL, and he told me that they make them swim underwater, and they hold them down until they drown. they run out of breath, and they breathe in the water, and they pull them out, and they resuscitate them or get the water out of them.

Now, I'm going to be 56 in a couple of weeks, and I'm about as thin as a rail. Now, I know what I can do and what I can't do, and that is not a reasonable duty to demand of me to go through Navy SEAL training, and I would just raise my hand and say, sir, you know, you're not, I don't think you're speaking to me, are you?

[13:19] And he would go, ooh, no, that's not required of you, sir, you can go on out. That's for the elite. In fact, only probably 2 or 3% of young men in America could make it through this training.

It's for the spiritually elite. So the rest of us can come out from underneath those requirements and say, that's not really something I have to really worry about. Well, you see, the disciples are doing that in a sense, and that's something that we also do.

Jeremiah did it, didn't he? Do you remember Jeremiah? God calls him to be a prophet, and immediately he says, Lord, but I'm just a youth. That's for the spiritually old and experienced, convinced, and that really can't be a reasonable, legitimate duty to lay upon me.

Have you ever done that with the Lord, or perhaps are you not realizing that you're doing it right now with some area? That you're saying, yes, I know that's commanded, and I know certain people like C.T.

Studd have done it, but that is an exploit, and we all know that exploits are not duties.

[14:42] Exploits are achievements. Before I go to the next point, and that's the end of this point, which was I'll never be able to do that, I want to just say that in the Christian life, there is no ethic of achievement.

There's an ethic of duty. what you must do and be as a Christian is never an achievement, an exploit of the great. It's always a reasonable, wise, holy, good duty that fits all of us today.

The third point, well, we said at first, you mean I have to do that? And then we said I'll never be able to do that, or how we come to a dead stop, and maybe you're at a dead stop somewhere.

And here's the third point. Through Christ, I am more than able to do that. In verse six, our Lord really does, in the following discussion, our Lord really does two things.

things. And in this third point, I'm talking to you about the first of these things. He corrects their attitude about faith, and then he's going to talk to them about duty. Faith, duty.

[16:07] What God gives me and enables me to do as a Savior, what God requires me to do as a Lord. Okay, so let's talk first about how our Lord corrects them.

Through Christ, I'm more than able to do that. Now, remember that they were thinking the people who can forgive seven times in a day are the spiritual elite, the great faiths.

And Jesus says to them that actually they're the ordinary people, the people of smallest faith, the people that have mustard seed faith.

And he says that if you do have this mustard seed faith, you could say to this mulberry tree, be uprooted and planted in the sea and it would obey you.

Now, when we look at that, we see the smallest of things, this mustard seed, and then we see the most amazing of acts.

[17:08] We see a mulberry tree uprooted from where it is and planted into the sea by someone. And so our Lord is talking to them about a law of disproportion in the Christian's life.

faith, in your life, there's a great disproportion and you must understand that between what you perceive to be your faith, how much faith you have, and what that sort of faith can actually do. If you could get a hold of that, it might just change your Christian life. Because sometimes we believe certain things about our faith that paralyze us. But Jesus says that small faith in a great God can do things that seem utterly disproportionate. Loving that person, enduring that trial with contentment, giving up that habit, becoming slowly and surely, because a lot of obediences you don't, hardly know obedience as you get to in one step. Almost all of them are little by little, right? We begin to obey once we're not at a dead stop anymore. But in any case, there's this disproportion between my faith, your faith, and what you can actually do in that area that you're thinking about.

[18:30] And you ask maybe, how could it be so? How could this mulberry tree miracle be really true of me? I feel so ordinary. I've been beaten by this area of my life and it just hasn't I've made no progress.

And the reason that there is a disproportion and that you can do it is that in God's kingdom where he commands, he enables. Where he insists, he supplies.

Let me give you one or two biblical examples. The first one is going back to Jeremiah. I'm just going to read you a couple of verses. Don't bother to turn there, but Jeremiah says, Ah, Lord God, behold, I do not know how to speak for I am only a youth.

Now, what could solve that? But the Lord said to me, do not say, either in your mind or out loud, do not say, I am only a youth.

For to all to whom I send you, you shall go. And whatever I command you, you shall speak. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you.

[19:57] Then the Lord put out his hand. Jeremiah's telling the story. Then the Lord put out his hand. What exactly did he mean by that? But anyway, put out his hand and touched my mouth and the Lord said to me, behold, look, I have put my words in your mouth.

Where the Lord commands, there the Lord enables. That's very important in the Christian life. Let me give you one more example and then I'll close this point and we'll move on to the fourth point which is the real reason I wanted to talk to you today.

But the last biblical example is Peter. Now, children, can you help me? Do you remember the day when Jesus was coming to the disciples walking on the water? They were in the boat and the disciples saw him and what did Peter say to the Lord when he saw him walking on the water? Does anyone know? This is a very difficult question. Don't be afraid if you're wrong. We'll only throw you out.

Can I give you a hint? Peter ended up walking on the water after he said this thing to Jesus. Now, do you remember what he said?

[21:24] It's a difficult one. I agree. I'll help you out. Peter said, Lord, command me to come to you. Why is that important?

Well, let's suppose he hadn't said that. Let's suppose that Peter, just of his own will and thought, had tried to come and walk on the water. What would have happened? But you see, he wanted the Lord to command him because if he knew that the Lord had commanded him, where the Lord commands, he enables.

and as soon as he heard the command, Mr. Small Faith came walking out. I know he looked around and fell afterwards, but forget about that this morning.

He did walk on water because he understood that where I know myself to be under the command of the Lord, I will know myself, even by my small faith, to be enabled by the Lord.

Now, this unfortunately is just the problem. Didn't I say that what the disciples did and what we often do is take ourselves out of the sense of being under God's command?

[22:52] Oh, that's not really a legitimate command to me. I don't have to become a man or woman of prayer. Well, I don't have to love that person or I don't have to be content under that trial. I know that some people, the great, can do those things, but the Lord's not really commanding me to do that.

You see, and once we take ourselves out from them underneath the sense that it is a now command, and the Lord says, I insist. If we don't have that sense that we're being commanded, we will not have the faith that he enables.

Because we know, instinctively, don't we? That it's where the Lord commands, there the Lord enables. So for the rest of his response to the disciples, our Lord turns to the subject of command, being under command, or what we call duty.

That it is my reasonable, legitimate, real, divinely given duty to give up that habit, to tame my tongue, love the lost, to pray for the world, to witness to my neighbor, and on and on.

So let's now look at the direction in which our Lord turns the thoughts of his disciples. And here it is that we see the incredible divine wisdom of our Lord.

[24 : 21] I want to submit to you that if I or any of your pastors had tried to respond to someone who said, you know, I don't have enough faith to do such and such, we would have never thought to take them in the direction that our Lord now takes the disciples.

And I think that even you, when Jason read this passage, and we heard this parable about the servant who comes in and still has to dress, and so you thought, what does that have to do with having enough faith?

It has everything to do with it. So let's read it again and try to understand. And this is the last point, let me state it. Under Christ's Lordship, I can and must do that.

So, Jesus says, will any of you, oh, I should actually tell you there's a word missing in my Bible.

How wicked of the translators. It says, but will any of you, and but shows us that this discussion is the continuation of what's been happening.

It belongs to increase our faith. If you had faith as a mustard seed, but any one of you, 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 sit down at table.

[25 : 52] Oh, you're so tired, you've plowed all day in that Middle Eastern sun with no motorized vehicles. Okay, you're behind the animals and you're plowing, you look so worn out.

Come and sit down. Will he not rather say to him, the master, prepare supper for me and dress properly and serve me while I eat and drink and afterward you will eat and drink.

Does he thank the servant because he did what was commanded? So you also, when you have done all that was commanded, say we are unworthy servants, we have only done what was our duty.

Now notice that throughout this parable, Jesus keeps talking about slaves, master, done all that was commanded, we've only done what was our duty.

You see what the parable is about? The parable is about being under reasonable, legitimate, and real command. It is my duty to do that.

[27 : 02] So, Jesus says three things about this and by the end I'm going to, hopefully with the Lord's help, tie this together so that you see how it all relates.

But let's just think first of all about the three things Jesus says about you and your duty. Now think about that area where you're at a dead stop. Okay? The first thing that Jesus says to you is that you must do all your duty.

Notice that he's plowed, that's half of his duty, he's worked out in the field all day. He comes in and what do we learn?

He must do all his duty. It's not enough to say, well look at all I did, I can stop here. Look at how much I have loved that person.

Look at how much I have slowed down a little bit that habit, et cetera, et cetera. And the first thing we need to do, we need to know and feel ourselves, is that you must do all your duty, the Lord insists.

[28 : 11] The second thing the Lord says is that it's only a duty. It's not an exploit for the elite.

And that's why in the parable he says, will the master thank him? Now let me ask you a question, you who are adults. Have you ever gotten a letter from the Internal Revenue Service saying, oh, thank you so much for paying your taxes?

That was such an exploit. That was amazing. Or as they would say in America today, awesome. How many have gotten a letter to that effect?

None? Why? Well, it's just your duty. The state of Israel has given out over many years since the Second World War a very prestigious honor and certificate to numerous people in Europe.

And it confers upon these individuals the title of just among the nations or righteous among the nations. And these are individuals who hid Jews during the Second World War to keep them from being taken away to concentration camps and killed.

[29:37] And so there are numerous people who did this wonderful thing during the Second World War. But there is only one town in the whole world that as a town collectively has received the title from the State of Israel just among the nations.

And that town is a small little village of Chambon-sur-Lignon in the center of France. I've been there. I've seen the town. I've heard about it.

During the Second World War this town which was a Protestant town, almost all Protestants, descendants of the Huguenots, very rare in France. But two pastors in the town during the war got the word out to the townspeople that we're going to start saving Jewish children.

The word got around all over France. And during those war years that little town of just a few hundred saved over 2,000 Jewish children by hiding them in their homes.

now I've been there and the guide told me, do you see that building just opposite this one where we are? That's where the German soldiers headquarter was.

[30:54] And in this building were Jewish children. To be found hiding Jewish children during World War II meant certain death.

And the whole town was involved in it. and they were receiving children from all over the country.

And I don't know how they hid them.

I don't know how they got them through, but they hid them, some of them for years before they could get them across the border. And if you want to count adults, they saved over 3,000 Jews from death.

But I saw a documentary about this before I left for France over 25 years ago. And at the end of the documentary, the journalist said, having interviewed the people and been there and they were still alive, many of them, and how did you do this?

How could you take this risk? The journalist said that what surprised me was that over and over again the people kept saying this phrase to me in French, c'est normal.

[32:01] blood. It's normal. Or in English we would probably say, it's nothing. You see, these were Huguenots.

They were descendants of the Protestants who were massacred. 30,000 in one day in the 1700s. They knew what it meant to need protection.

And they said, these are children that life has thrown out the door. But of course it's our duty. And nothing but our duty to save them.

And this is the place where sometimes we we've messed ourselves all up. Lord, increase our faith. That's for the great. No.

See, no man. Do you see how much you have been forgiven? For you to forgive seven times in a day? It's nothing.

[33:14] And when we think this way and we come back underneath the lordship of Jesus Christ in this area and we say to our Lord, yes, it is legitimate.

Yes, it is reasonable that I should love this person, that I should sacrifice this thing, that I should kill this habit, that I should become a man or woman that is heavenly minded.

It is reasonable. C'est normal. After all that you have done for me, the sacrifice that you have made, you were the servant who plowed all day and then came in and did all the rest and went to the very end.

and you said it was only your duty. Certainly, it's nothing but my duty, Lord, to obey.

So, what I'm saying is sometimes we come to the dead stop and we think it's because we don't have enough faith or some other spiritual resource for my Lord as Savior and Sanctifier when the problem is really completely somewhere else.

[34:26] It's that we've taken ourselves out from underneath the sense of submission to Christ not as Savior but as Lord. You see? Because where He commands and we know He commands and it's legitimate command there we know He enables.

But we've split Christ the Lord from Christ the Savior. We no longer feel that He'll help us enough because we no longer feel that He really has the right to command us to do that thing.

And so if we think about someone like Jeremiah we hear the Lord saying to him wherever I send you you shall go and whatever I say to you whatever I tell you you shall say we sense this and then we hear for I am with you to deliver you the two always have to go together you can't ever separate them and the lordship of Christ is a wonderful lordship it is not a tyrannical lordship the parable because it's human and earthly you know that you go wow that was a mean boss he wouldn't even

let him you know eat when he came in our lord says take my yoke upon you for my yoke is easy and my burden is light once we come underneath it and once you see saying no to that sin not as an exploit wow

I'm going to be special I'm going to be a great Christian here I am in self righteousness again right because I'm thinking of doing an exploit and I want applause when I get through right I that he might be lord over you saving lord so to get us past our dead stop often what we need to realize is that we've brought ourselves out from underneath our sense of duty and the normality of it and the lordship of christ and we need to take our place again and be able to say once you've done all that you were commanded!

servants we've only done our duty why do we say we're unworthy servants because it took a heck of a lot for the lord to finally get us to do that here's this young lady who grew up very posh background and now she's got a baby and she's got to wake up four times a night five and feed this baby and she goes to the family gathering and she tells everyone as if it's an exploit she's never had to sacrifice in her life and she's expecting oh you're so marvelous and all the ladies are looking around going been there done that right you see and the more she thinks it's an exploit the more we go oh boy she's selfish is she unworthy the harder it was for me to do that the more it proves not that I was worthy the elite the more it proves that I was unworthy and so when we get to the end and we see what it took us to do all that we say we were unworthy servants we've only done our duty may I just say a word in ending to someone who might not be a

[38:34] Christian I wonder if this might not be where you're stuck maybe there's somebody who knows you need to come to Jesus and you know the gospel you know Jesus has done it all you know you're a sinner you know you need to come back and be reconciled really reconciled and really know in your own conscience I have come to Jesus Christ I've repented and come back to God and now I'm going to live for God you know you need to do that and you even feel bad about the fact that you haven't done it but you're stuck sometimes it's because you're hearing the invitation that Jesus the Savior says come and I'll save you come and I'll save you but you haven't quite heard Jesus the Lord and so I want to tell you a story there was a ship that was making its way a long time ago not in modern times to deliver a very important cargo and the captain of that ship was a strong and good man he had three sons on that ship that he'd taken with him one was a teenager the second son was not and the third son was not they were younger now he had told his sons as any good captain there's one rule that's absolute on this ship and that is you never climb the mast of the ship you remember it's the big pole that holds up the sail and in a big ship it's very high the mast it's a big pole and there's a cross bar on it he said you never climb the mast because you do have men sailors have to mast unless

I tell you well one day a storm had hit and it was a big storm and the boat the ship was lurching over to the side the waves were coming from the west and it was really pushing the waves and the wind pushing the boat over like this and the captain came up on deck to make sure everything was secure and to his horror he saw that his three and this was the reason he told them never to do that and he could tell they could barely hold on you could hear the mass creaking under their weight and they were panicked they were too panicked to try to climb down climbing in a situation like that climbing down is very dangerous itself they were holding on for dear life but they wouldn't be able to do it long and that's!

the water not the deck throw yourself off the deck and I will save you well the boat lurched he didn't throw himself scared to death and it didn't lurch and the father kept saying son now and he said father I don't know how to swim and his father said I'm about to jump in the water son I will save you that's a wonderful invitation I will save you and maybe you've heard that invitation but it didn't work for the little boy and it was a dangerous situation because the other two could not throw themselves off because he was in the way he had to go first then they could go he was endangering his life and he was about to kill his two younger brothers by holding on and he was endangering the whole ship because if the ship if the mass breaks all of the men are in danger if they're unable to repair it in the middle of the ocean and so the father pulled out his gun and from the edge of!

he said son he pointed it at him he said son I am your father and I love you but I am also the captain of this ship responsible for every man on it and for your brothers now I command you you must jump and I will save you and the son heard something in that call that voice that he rarely heard from dad that tone of voice you must I command you and the gun was upon him and the father was crying if you think I'm exaggerating psalm 7 says if a man does not repent God will wet His sword

he has bent and readied his bow he has prepared for him his deadly weapons making his arrows fiery shafts you see

God is your Lord he is absolute Lord God of the universe and coming to Jesus Christ is not an option for you it is a command it is a legitimate command it is a loving command and the Lord says to you you must come I command you for you are endangering your life you are selling my glory and you are endangering other people's lives because by not repenting you influence them not to repent!

[ 44 : 45 ] and so I do plead with you if you're not converted to hear the voice of the Savior that says I will save you for I love you but you must know that today it is true what I'm telling you that Christ is saying you in a lordly voice you must come for I command you to do so if you want to talk about this I would be glad to talk to you after the service or speak to one of your pastors or someone you have confidence in may all of us know our Savior and our Lord as Savior and Lord Lord Jesus thank you that you commanded Peter to get out of the boat and the water became firm under his feet thank you that you have power over the wind and the waves and you have power over the souls of men so

I pray Lord Jesus put forth your power and command sinners to come sinners to get out of the boat and leave their old lives and come to you Lord Jesus do that for your glory sake that we might see your power and your grace and your love that we might know you better and that for endless ages to come we might fall on our faces before you and worship you as our Lord and as our Savior we do this for your own glory amen to to!

to