

## **“Don’t be like Pharisees!” Luke 17:5-10**

**And he said to his disciples, “Temptations to sin are sure to come, but woe to the one through whom they come! It would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck and he were cast into the sea than that he should cause one of these little ones to sin. Pay attention to yourselves! If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him, and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, saying, ‘I repent,’ you must forgive him.”**

**The apostles said to the Lord, “Increase our faith!” And the Lord said, “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. “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 recline at table’? Will he not rather say to him, ‘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 you were commanded, say, ‘We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty.’”**

From time to time in our private conversation or in our Bible studies you have expressed your frustration about how hard it sometimes is to understand what our dear Lord is speaking to us in the Bible. Sometimes it is not easy.

Sometimes you wonder, why didn’t the Holy Spirit put it more clearly? Why didn’t He make it easier for us to understand? I often go through the same struggle. For example, our todays reading. What does it mean? Why did Luke write it in this place of his Gospel account? How do these verses even hold together? Is there any unifying theme? The struggle is real...

We can’t fully understand the Scripture on our own, for we are so limited. And the Good News is that we don’t have to. For we belong to the community of God’s saints, and we have so many generations who have gone before us. They have been guided by the same Holy Spirit.

We are blessed to be able to draw from this rich heritage and to learn the wealth of insights that the Lord of the Church has given to them... also for our benefit. And for that we need to be eternally grateful.

Now, about our today’s text. In verses 1-10 of this chapter (we read only verses 5 to 10) the Holy Spirit summarizes Jesus’ teaching from the previous chapters, where He was speaking against the Pharisees and their false religiosity. We could entitle this section: “Don’t be like Pharisees!”

Thus, Jesus issues several warnings. First, He warns against false teachings, against anything that may lead someone to act against the will of God. We often

don't take these things seriously enough. You may have heard people saying something along the lines: "Don't worry about the doctrine, the main thing is to love people."

Sure... Jesus however, differs from these smart people. He warns: "It would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck and he were cast into the sea than that he should cause one of these little ones to sin."

The false teachings are like sickness that can gradually destroy the whole body, in this case, our faith and rob us of God's promises and the life to come. And we are sent to deliver the words of eternal life, and not to spread some spiritual viruses.

Then Jesus says something else, which we don't like to hear. At least I don't like to hear it. For it makes my life harder. Because it is so much contrary to what our society believes. Nevertheless, this is what Jesus admonishes us to do.

"If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him, and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, saying, 'I repent,' you must forgive him." How about that?

Our culture has made individuals and their "rights" to choose into the highest and the noblest value in our society. Everyone, at least this is what we are continually told, has the right to choose and to do whatever they want.

Perhaps as long as it doesn't hurt anyone... whatever it means. But Jesus has this very different take on it. If your brothers or sisters in Christ sin, rebuke them, and if they repent, forgive them.

'Yes, but who are we to tell someone that they sin... who are we to tell anyone that they have done something wrong... We are not perfect either. How will we say something that may offend our brothers and sisters in Christ?!'

For most people have learned to be so sensitive... However, Jesus tells us: "Do this!" Why would Jesus compel us to do it? Because He knows how important it is. Every sin separates us from God, and Jesus uses us to warn His beloved.

Every sin, if it is not dealt with, if we haven't repented of it and received God's forgiveness, threatens our salvation. This is truly loving when we care about our fellow saints and their salvation, and do what we can to help them.

That is for this very reason that Jesus has given the Church the gift of forgiveness. The focus is not on rebuke. The focus is on forgiveness. The focus is on restoring our brothers or sisters, on declaring them God's grace and forgiveness.

This is what we as God's people are called to do. This is our mission. Lovingly calling people to turn away from their sins and idols, and inviting them back to the beautiful and joyful fellowship with God the Father and Jesus Christ.

Therefore, as Jesus says, there shouldn't be limits to our forgiveness. For there are no limits to God's grace. There are no limits to Jesus' desire to bring us closer to Himself, and there are no limits in how much our Father daily forgives us.

As soon as we repent, He as our loving Father runs to us to embrace us. God's forgiveness to us and our forgiveness to others is not about what is just and fair, it is about God's unconditional grace that has the power to renew our hearts.

When the disciples heard all of this, they got scared. And rightly so. It is not easy. Who can be certain that they have understood God's message clearly and will not cause someone to stumble with false teaching?

Or who wants to rebuke their brothers and sisters when they sin? Even if we know that it is a loving thing to do it, practically it is still not the easiest mission to accomplish. And who among us is ready to forgive again and again, and again...

Even if that is how we are forgiven daily. What Jesus demands is hard. This is why the disciples cried out: "Increase our faith!" In response Jesus says one of these things which make us go ... "hmm... really?!"

"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." Are you sure about this Jesus? Do you think it is a good idea to move trees around?

What are you, Jesus, teaching us? Jesus often spoke in hyperbole, wanting to emphasise certain things. This time – the power of true faith. Or we could say that Jesus reminds us about what true faith is. It is not something that we do.

Our faith, as our trust in true God, is not simply a set of beliefs, it is the presence and the power of the Holy Spirit in us. God with you. When Jesus compares this true faith with a grain of mustard seed, it is not about the size of our faith.

It is about the transforming power of the Holy Spirit in us. Like a grain of mustard seed, it keeps growing, and keeps growing and growing and spreading and takes over until it grows into something great.

Our faith is not small. We may have or may not have true faith. But it can't be small. For it is not our doing. It is God's work in us. Our faith may be young, we may not be mature, but true faith is never small. For it connects us with the creative and renewing power of our God.

It is about our God Himself dwelling with you and in you. It is not about trusting our abilities and efforts that will do unimaginable, it is our trust in our God, our reliance and obedience to Him and His Word that will perform wonders.

And in fact, what Jesus promises to His disciples in this saying, has been fulfilled again and again and again. “You could say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea,’ and it would obey you.”

God’s people are often compared with good, fruitful trees. The unbelieving world is often compared with sea. What Jesus says can be put like this: “If you trust me, if you listen to me, then you will be able to speak the Gospel to this world and you will witness the Gospel transforming people and bringing them into the Kingdom of God. Not in your power, but by the power of my Word and my Spirit.”

“Jesus, increase our faith!” It is not about us becoming super believers. It is about asking for God’s help so that we can trust the power of His Word, that God will achieve His goals not because of our abilities, but despite our weaknesses.

And we are in this great situation. Our churches are aging. Our society is becoming more and more hostile to the Gospel. This is a perfect setting and a perfect time to trust in our God and His power alone and let Him act. And He will...

Finally, about this last saying where Jesus speaks about a servant and his duties and attitudes. He wasn’t describing some unusual situation. Just a simple reality of servants’ life. You have your list of duties. Like a job description. Do them. When you have done them, don’t boast, for you haven’t done anything extraordinary.

Remember, Jesus speaks against the false piety of the Pharisees. They liked to boast about their good work, so that everyone would look up to them. What about us? Don’t we like to boast about our good words?

We do... both non-Christians and Christians. How does it look like? You may have heard non-Christians describing their goodness like this: “I am okay, I haven’t killed anyone, haven’t stolen too much, haven’t committed adultery too often, haven’t lied recently and I also have done some good things as well.”

Are we Christians much different? Often not... We may add that we have attended our services and supported our congregations, and may be done a few more good things. Does this give us any reason for boasting?

Maybe it simply reveals how low a view we have on ourselves, if we are ready to boast in such small things? Perhaps it reveals how much we have misunderstood God’s intentions and hopes for us. What did God say at the creation of mankind?

“Okay, let’s create mankind, so that they don’t kill, don’t steal, don’t commit adultery and from time to time do something good.” That’s such a caricature of who we are created to be. Your God, your Father in heaven, and your Brother Jesus Christ has very different a view on you, and on every human being.

He has created us as the pinnacle of His creation. We are His greatest creation. You are His greatest creation. He has created you for glorious tasks, to continue His work of creation and to participate in His work of salvation. He has created you as eternal beings, He knows what potential He has built into you.

He knows what you will be like, when you finally reach your eternal home. He knows what you will be like, when you are purified from all the filth of our sinfulness, that now hinders us to be so much more.

He knows that you will be like Him, and will see Him as He is and you will reign with Him over entire creation forever. He knows that there are no more majestic and glorious, no more beautiful creatures, than the resurrected people of God.

That's how He sees you. Our God has called us already now. Already now He wants us to start to grow into this greatness that He has built into us. He empowers us to strive for this greatness, being the light for this world, radiating God's love and faithfulness and wisdom into this world, by the power of His Spirit.

He Himself helps us, He dwells in us and renews us, and if there is anything good in our lives, that is the work of the Holy Spirit in us. And for that we can't boast, we can only give thanks to our gracious God.

Let us pray today together with the apostles: "Increase our faith, Jesus! Don't let us become like Pharisees! Shape us to be who you created and redeemed us to be, empower us to be faithful in what is entrusted to us, and help us to always praise you for what you have done for us, and for what you do in our lives!"

Amen.