

Luke 17:1-10: <sup>1</sup>And [Jesus] said to his disciples, “Temptations to sin are sure to come, but woe to the one through whom they come! <sup>2</sup>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. <sup>3</sup>Pay attention to yourselves! If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him, <sup>4</sup>and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, saying, ‘I repent,’ you must forgive him.”

<sup>5</sup>The apostles said to the Lord, “Increase our faith!” <sup>6</sup>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.

<sup>7</sup>“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’? <sup>8</sup>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’? <sup>9</sup>Does he thank the servant because he did what was commanded? <sup>10</sup>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.’”

### “The Faith to do Our Duty”

#### INTRODUCTION

There are two conflicting Christian attitudes in our Christian culture today: the Theology of Glory versus the Theology of the Cross.

The Theology of Glory—known best in Christian circles by the titles: “Name-it, Claim-it Gospel” or “Health and Wealth Gospel” or “the Prosperity Gospel”—claims that if you repent of our sins, and then live a good life, work hard, pray without ceasing, give your tithes to the church—in other words, do your Christian duty—then God more or less owes you a comfortable life, a life free from suffering and sacrifice. In fact, theologians of glory take “victories,” accomplishments, and political or social stature as signs of God’s favor.

Proponents of the Theology of Glory claim that above all God wants you to be happy, healthy and wealthy.

The Theology of the Cross, on the other hand, embraces the words of Jesus (Matt. 16:24):  
““If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.”  
Proponents of the Theology of the Cross claim that the life of the Christian is one lived under the cross—suffering for Christ in this world—for the disciple is not above His master—if they persecuted Jesus, they will persecute you.

Jesus suffered greatly for the message of love and faithfulness to God’s Word that He proclaimed and lived. We see the theology of the cross in the apostle Paul, who was no stranger to suffering, who said in our Epistle reading: “Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord, nor of me his prisoner, but share in suffering for the gospel by the power of God, who saved us and called us to a holy calling...”

So, which is the true picture of Christianity: Theology of Glory, or Theology of the Cross? In other words, can we lay claim to earthly blessings because we’re worthy servants, or can we lay claim only to the cross because we’re unworthy servants?

Our text will answer this question for us.

## I. The Demands Placed Upon Disciples

Jesus opens our text today with these words to His disciples: “Temptations to sin are sure to come, but woe to the one through whom they come! <sup>2</sup>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.”

Jesus instructs His disciples about the reality of sin: It’s inevitable—people—Christians—will do and say things that cause other people to sin. And if someone does cause another person

to sin—especially those young or weak in the faith—well, it would be better for that person to die a horrible death than to face God’s wrath.

So, Jesus says to His disciples: “Pay attention to yourselves!” Knowing the gravity of sin, it is your duty as Christians not to be the cause of another person’s fall into sin.

Then Jesus gives a further instruction to His disciples when He adds: “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.”

If a brother in the faith sins, you are duty-bound to rebuke him—to show him his sin—with the hope that he’ll recognize his sinfulness and repent. And if he does repent, you are duty-bound to forgive him.

These things aren’t optional—they are your duty.

## II. We Fail in Our Duty.

The apostles know that this is a hard thing that Jesus demands. They respond by saying: “Increase our faith!”

Why do they ask Jesus to increase their faith? The disciples realize that Jesus has just placed three impossible demands upon His followers: Because you know the gravity of sin, 1) don’t be the cause of another person’s sin; 2) rebuke your Christian brother or sister who is caught in sin; and 3) forgive the repentant brother or sister in the faith.

Just think in your own lives how impossible it is to fulfill these three simple duties that Jesus expects from His followers.

How often have you been the cause of another person’s falling into sin? Have you ever nodded approvingly at gossip or made prejudicial remarks about another person’s race? What

kind of message are you sending to your neighbor if you're not in church every Sunday, or if he hears profanity or dirty jokes spewing from your lips, or if you hold a grudge against him?

As Christians, we're called to live a life that serves as a witness of God's goodness and mercy; therefore, any sin we commit has the potential of giving a bad witness, of causing those who see or hear it to sin.

Furthermore, the Lord instructed His disciples to rebuke and to forgive sin. But how often do we find it easier to look the other way—to have a live and let live attitude—when we see a fellow believer caught in sin? And how difficult is it for us to forgive a fellow believer just once, much less seven times in a day? Though Jesus bore His cross for all of our sins, we bear our grudges easily enough for just one sin.

And guess what? Even if we could be so perfect that we never cause anyone to sin, that we always gently and lovingly rebuke an erring brother—and even if we're so full of forgiveness that we forgive our Christian brother every time he said, "I'm sorry, please forgive me," our Lord would consider us as having met His minimum requirements—we're just doing our duty.

Jesus illustrates what He's saying with these words: "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.'"

Jesus demands that we live a sin-free life, rebuke our sinning brother or sister in truth and love, and forgive as freely as we've been forgiven. That's the minimum He expects from us. And even doing that means that we've only done our duty. We're still unworthy servants.

But the truth is, we don't even come close to doing our duty before God. So, how can we claim blessings from God if we've can't even do the bare minimum He requires?

### III. The Kind of Faith that Makes Us Worthy

A stronger faith must be the answer, so we plead with the apostles: "Increase our faith."

But what is faith? Many people believe that faith is something that exists on its own—"just have faith" or "just believe", they'll say. They believe faith is a power that enables you to do whatever miracles you desire—and that as this "faith-power" increases so does your worthiness and ability before God.

But if that's the case, then your faith becomes the object of your focus and trust. This misunderstanding of faith takes the focus off of Christ and puts it on the heart of the believer. Apart from Christ, faith becomes a work of man and not a gift from God.

The disciples think that faith is power, so they ask Jesus to increase this power so they can do their duty. But Jesus says, "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."

Note that Jesus says: "If you HAD faith." In the Lord's eyes, it isn't the amount of faith that you have, but THAT you have faith and THAT faith is in Him. Faith doesn't save because of itself, faith saves because it grafts you onto Jesus Christ—the object of faith.

Your faith in Jesus Christ is what makes you worthy servants before God because it attaches you to Jesus who is the Worthy Servant. Jesus lived a perfectly sinless life that caused no one to sin. He rebuked sinners in perfect truth and love—and He forgave all who sinned against Him—even as He hung from the cross. And on that cross, Jesus took all the sins that make you unworthy servants before God—and gave you His righteousness. God hung the

millstone of His wrath on Jesus' neck so that you could receive free and boundless and could be called Children of God.

Without Jesus, faith is just a meaningless psychological condition. But properly understood, faith is God's gift to you. The Holy Spirit gives you faith in Christ through the means of Grace—the Word and Holy Baptism—and He preserves and strengthens faith in Christ through the means of Grace—the Word and the Lord's Supper.

And the truth is, as the Holy Spirit increases your faith in Jesus through God's Word and Sacrament, the more you realize just how weak your faith is. The more you put your trust in the Lord, the more you realize you're unable to do what Christ demands, and the more you turn to Him for forgiveness and help to live the life that He desires. It's because faith attaches you to Jesus that you are able to do your duty as Christians, which means that God gets all the glory even for your good works, because it is Christ who does them through you.

#### CONCLUSION

The Theologian of Glory believes that he stands worthy before God because of his own works and piety. But the Theologian of the Cross knows that he's a sinner and that apart from Christ he stands before God unworthy of earthly or heavenly blessings. He knows true glory isn't found in earthly health, wealth or security, but in the spiritual health, wealth and security of the cross of Jesus Christ.

So, no matter how weak or strong this faith is, it is saving faith because it is faith in Jesus, the Worthy Servant of the Most High God, whose worthiness makes you worthy before the Most High God.

In Jesus' Name. Amen.