

1689 Conference – 2018
TALK#09
1689 Conference 9/14-15/18 2nd Lecture

Luke 17:1-10 A Humble Prayer

Intro: The Kingdom of God is not what we expect. We tend to approach and consider it in light of our own lives and circumstances. We take what we know of this life, and assume that the Kingdom of God is a better version of what we experience here.

Perhaps the best example of this is the way that Christians often view heaven. They think of it as a place full of enjoyment—the reward for the disappointments of this life. We'll have the best clothing & food & drink, live in beautiful homes, have great golf courses or beaches or gardens or skiing or whatever their favorite hobby happens to be, and enjoy these things forever to the glory of God! But us this what heaven is about? NO. The best and greatest reward of heaven is God Himself—to live and move in His presence with great happiness forever. This makes all of the imagined luxuries of heaven worthless, when we have the greatest gift, Christ himself.

But this is only an example. It suggests how our thought processes are bound up with this life. Far too often, our eyes are turned downward to this world, and we let it define for us the kingdom of God. The KoG becomes a grander form of what we know here. We expect God to act according to our knowledge and do what we would do. God becomes like us.

This was exactly the same problem for Jesus' disciples who walked with him in his ministry. I suppose that in some sense we may take comfort that our problem is their problem as well, but we must learn that their remedy must be our remedy also.

The KoG is really topsy-turvy. It is not a mirror image of this world, nor is it a greater and expanded version of our lives and expectations. It is a new and different world. Jesus' disciples had to learn this, and for them it was a long and slow process (Acts 1:6), and we must learn it as well. For us, it will probably be just as long and slow.

Consider the words of Luke 17:5, “The apostles said to the Lord ‘Increase our faith.’” Why did they say this?

-Context- Luke sometimes provides markers to help us think through the context of various incidents. 17:11 marks the beginning of a new section and the end of ours. But, where does ours begin?

CF. 15:1. This seems to be a marker.

Follow the context with me.

15:11

16:1, 14

17:1

17:5

All of these events occur as part of one incident. It's like a scene in a play.

If this is correct, then everything in chapters 15-17 is part of our pericope, so that our text is the climax of this incident. What do we find in that larger context?

15:1&2 Introduction: the scene is set. Tax collectors and sinners come to him; Pharisees and scribes complain.

15:3-10 Parables—lost sheep and lost coin. Jesus challenges the Pharisees and scribes about their criticism of His teaching. **Jesus saves sinners—not the self-righteous.**

15:11-37 Parable of the Prodigal son. To describe God's mercy to sinners and the hypocrisy of the self-righteous.

Chapter 15 is all about the salvation of *sinners*.

16:1-13 Parable of the unjust steward—showing the evil of the love of money.

16:14-18 Another rebuke of the Pharisees. In vs. 14, they deride him. Vs. 15 is a key text for our point. Jesus challenges and disrupts the Pharisees' religiosity. They seek the praise of men, and pursue it, while God knows that their hearts are wicked. The Law and the prophets are the foreshadow of the gospel. The scribes and Pharisees love money, and praise from men, and women. And they are condemned. This is demonstrated by the parable following

16:19-31 Story of the rich man and Lazarus. The beggar enjoys the KoG while the wealthy man is sent to torment. CF. Vs. 31—this is what the Scriptures teach. Chapter 16 is about the problems of money & sin.

17:1-4 is about the importance of a forgiving spirit—over and over again—a scandalous idea to most Jews. They were about revenge; Jesus teaches forgiveness.

All of this is relevant. Remember that Jesus' disciples would have been raised in a religious culture that was dominated by the Pharisees and Scribes. Their teaching would have been the accepted doctrine of the day. And as Jesus speaking, he was challenging & overturning these accepted ideas!

Jesus had won the confidence of the disciples. They did not challenge him. But as he offered different perspectives on each of these issues—as he spoke of God's concern for sinners & rejection of the self-righteous; about the evils of the love of money & the mercy God extends (not to the rich) but to beggars; about the judgment to come on those who offend the weak; about forgiveness as a way of life, even his disciples were astounded. He was overturning their view of the KoH. It was **not** what the Pharisees and scribes said—it was completely different from their expectation, and all that they could do was say “increase our faith.”

I wonder what it would have been like to observe them. Did their faces give evidence of astonishment as they listened? Were they puzzled to hear him say that the ethics of the KoG were so very different to what

they had been taught? At least we may say this—their response was the correct one, Lord, increase our faith.

What is faith?

1. Is it a blind venture into the future? A leap? A wish? (Disney—“believe”)
2. Is it a mindless pursuit of a goal set before you, like a mouse placed in a track to race to the food at the end?

Sometimes this is how people think.

Faith is trust. It involves understanding, agreement & acceptance. Faith involves the mind.

Faith is based in what God says. It seeks to understand His revelation, to recognize the truth of that word from God, and then acts appropriately. Faith is never blind; it is actually full of light.

But it often calls us to re-order our thinking so that we view life, not according to what we learn and observe in this world, but rather based on the revelation God gives us in his Word. Think about some familiar texts:

Matt 5.4 “Blessed are those who mourn”

Matt 20.16 “The last will be first and the first will be last”

Matt 16:25 “Whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.”

Luke 14:11 “Everyone who exalts himself shall be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

1 Cor. 1:18 :The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.”

Everything about the KoG is different. This is the great challenge, and the reason why the apostles' request is so very vital.

Increase our faith. It is a humble prayer. Think about it.

1. This prayer is directed to the Lord: “the apostles said to the Lord.” They recognized that only the Lord could grant their petition. He is the one who has just given them a new outlook on basic issues; he is teaching them that God’s ways are not the same as man’s ways—and they hear & believe, and ask him for help. As they realize their own ignorance & inadequacy, they turn to him, *and so also must we*. Are we any different? Do you ever think about the KoG and assume that it is like this present world only better? We all need this prayer. It changes us now.
2. This prayer is spoken by the apostles. Notice the flow. Chapters 15 & 16 seem to be primarily addressed to Pharisees and Scribes. Even in Chapter 16, where Jesus spoke to his disciples, the religious leaders listened and mocked (16:14). In chapter 17:1, Jesus again speaks to his disciples, and in 17:5, it’s the apostles who speak. These are the first words in the pericope spoken by anyone but Jesus. The Scribes & Pharisees grumbled and ridiculed, but we don’t hear their words.

There is a movement in the context from opponents to followers (who hear the application) to apostles. Even those closest to him, the foundation stones of the Kingdom, recognize how little they know, & how challenging the truth of the KoG can be.

If the apostles needed to pray this prayer, how much more do we?

3. This prayer is a corporate prayer. The text in Greek & in English is quite clear. The **apostles** said to the Lord, ‘increase **our** faith.’ They did not one-by-one say ‘increase my faith.’ Together they spoke to the Lord. They recognized that this was a fault and a need they shared together. Do we each individually have this need? Of course. But that’s not the point *here*. It is rather that together, the PoG need to grow in faith, and together express that faith.

This is vital, e.g., to corporate prayer. When the church comes together to pray, it is not as individuals. We pray together as a church, which means that *our* faith—the faith of the whole—needs to be increased. We will see why this is important in a moment.

4. This prayer is a profound acknowledgement of weakness—not necessarily sin—just human weakness. The disciples were astonished—Jesus teaching turned their world on its head. But they knew he was correct. The only thing that could help them re-order their minds was for the Lord to increase their faith—faith in his Word so that they might understand and enter the heavenly kingdom.

They greatly desired to grow in the things of God—in this grace. To reject the love of money, to show mercy to the poor, to live a life of forgiveness, and they knew that the only way to do this was to ask the Lord to increase this grace. Faith does not belong to this world, it belongs to Christ’s kingdom. Lord, increase our faith.” Isn’t this a prayer we all need? And don’t we need it in our churches?

5. This prayer is about faith. **To emphasize this point.** Faith is a grace given from above. We don’t work it up here. You can’t purchase it at a store or acquire it from a book. God grants faith, or more specifically here, the Lord Jesus must increase faith.

The apostles know the importance of heeding Jesus’ words, to understand them better, to accept their wisdom rather than the current practice of the culture in which they lived. And they needed to act based on this increase of faith. M. Henry: “We have all need to get our faith strengthened, because, as that grace grows, all other graces grow.”

This is a thoroughly Christ-centered prayer, calling upon Jesus to make the disciples more heavenly minded. At this moment, they realized just how great their need was. Do we realize this as well?

6. The result of this prayer is growth in the KoG. Verses 6-10 form something of an epilogue to this pericope. First cf. vs. 6. “the Lord said, “If you have faith as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be pulled up by the roots and be planted in the sea,’ and it would obey you.”

Our English texts hide the corporate nature of vs. 6. If you [plural] have faith. **Texas**—“**all y’all.**” **Read it in Texan!** Jesus speaks to the apostles as a group. He does not mean that

faith allows people to do as they please—move the tree—but rather that when Christ’s people together exercise their faith, great things happen in the KoG.

The apostles learned this lesson. It is the reality of the church in Jerusalem. How does the KoG grow? By the prayer of faith—asking God to do as he promised.

Remember that faith begins with revelation. It hears what God says in Scripture, and then acts upon this word from God. Moving a tree may be spectacular, but it is really nothing beyond the “wow factor.” Seeing God at work is far better.

7. Now let’s briefly notice verses 7-10. What are they about? Aren’t they a strange response? Perhaps not what we’d expect? “well done men, I will give you faith” is what we might anticipate. But Jesus seems to rebuke his apostles. What’s going on?

Verses 7-10 are about a life without faith. What does a servant do for his master? He serves. He does what he is commanded to do. Vs. 10. We are to do everything commanded, but we cannot bring about growth in the KoG. Only God can do this, we may be unprofitable servants, but He is able to do much. The servant should disappear, and the master should be glorified. We must do our duty, and cry out to him to do far more.

In this text, we can see clearly how prayer is a means of grace. It is overt—on the surface of the text. The apostles are asking the Lord to make faith grow. We seek grace corporately through the instrument of prayer. But there is also more:

When we pray “increase our faith,” we are asking

1. For an increase in our understanding of God and his ways as revealed in Scripture. The Apostles heard the word of God from the mouth of Jesus—we read it in the Bible. And as we hear it, preach it, and read it, we need to ask the Lord to deepen our understanding, and growth in our knowledge. **Increase our faith.**

2. When we pray “increase our faith,” we are asking for a change in our perspectives on living, so that we see life God’s way and not our own. We are immersed in our times and culture—even religious culture—and perhaps are blind to the wonders of God’s heavenly kingdom. Our culture loves the biggest, the brightest, the dazzling. We want upgrades in our cars and homes. We fall prey to advertising propaganda. And it unconsciously infiltrates our churches. Too often, we seek to gain the world, forgetting that the result is the loss of our souls. We need to be more heavenly minded in order to be useful in doing earthly good. **Increase our faith.**
3. When we pray “increase our faith,” we are asking for God to work powerfully according to His revealed promise. Without the Lord’s blessing, all our efforts will be in vain. And, everything that we do outside his revealed will is utterly useless. It is a waste of time and effort. Instead of following his purpose, we impose our own ideas, and they fall flat. Like our culture, we crave the new, exciting and spectacular. The Lord calls us to the unspectacular and ordinary. This is not a text for prosperity preachers, though it is often abused by them. Rather it is a call to the regular, the simple, the straightforward. It is an example of the importance of the means of grace. The Lord has given them, we must use them. **Increase our faith.**

Matthew Henry says it well: “Let the discoveries of faith be more clear, the desires of faith more strong, the dependencies of faith more firm & fixed, the dedications of faith more entire and resolute, and the delights of faith more blessed.”

Brothers and sisters, this text is a call to us. We are just like Jesus’ disciples—we aren’t even apostles. If they needed an increase of faith, how much more do we?

How much of the world’s thinking has influenced our views of Christ’s church and kingdom? How much more must we learn of his will? Are we unsatisfied with the regular (according to rule) and ordinary?

Shouldn't we, with all humility, join the apostles in this prayer?
Shouldn't we expect the Lord to answer? And shouldn't we expect
him to do his will among us?

Let's be like them. Let's look to Jesus Christ our Lord and cry out to
him **increase or faith**. Amen.