



CHRISTIAN CRUSADERS

7401 UNIVERSITY AVE., CEDAR FALLS, IOWA 50613

(319) 277-0924

INFO@CHRISTIANCRUSADERS.ORG

WWW.CHRISTIANCRUSADERS.ORG

Why Trust and Obey?

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Rev. Steve Kramer

TEXT: Luke 17:5-10 (ESV)

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.’”

Dale Rooks, a school crossing guard in Florida, tried everything imaginable to get cars to slow down and obey the speed limit in a school zone. But nothing seemed to work until he took a blow dryer and wrapped it in electrical tape, making it look like a radar gun of sorts. Now he just points the thing at cars and it's incredible how quickly they hit the brakes and obediently stay in the speed limit. “It's almost comical,” Dale says. “It's amazing how well this thing works.”

Let me ask you: what motivates you to obey? There are many reasons why we might obey someone, including God. Perhaps it's fear – obeying because you have to, or else. Or it might be for reward – obeying because you get something out of it. Trust is another reason – obeying because you've learned to trust the one giving the command. Or love is another motivator as well – obeying out of love for God and the people in my life. And I'm sure there are lots of other reasons why we obey that I haven't covered

here. And why do we not obey? It's probably because of pride, selfishness, ordinariness, rebelliousness, a lack of trust in the one giving directions.

Our story from Luke today is about being obedient disciples of Jesus. Along the way, Jesus had given many commands to his followers: Pick up your cross and follow me. Don't serve money. Take care of the poor. And just previously in today's passage, he's given them some commands that he wanted obeyed. These orders were about relationships with each other, and other Christians: Don't lead others away from God, encouraging them to sin with your words and actions. And don't take sin lightly: if your brother sins go and gently correct him, get him turned around, and if he repents, forgive him over and over again. And the disciples, upon hearing all these orders being piled up, are a bit overwhelmed by all this. This sounds difficult, almost impossible to carry out. They might have even had some doubts about the wisdom of these directives. So instead of saying, "Yes, Lord, we'll do it," they respond in this way: "Increase our faith." In other words, "what you're asking is too much for us as we are. We're lacking what it takes to do what you've commanded. We can't do this. We don't have the power to live like that." I kind of understand their request. We've all been there, haven't we? We sense God calling us to something. We say, "I can't do that. I can't lead someone to Christ. I can't help these people who are so in need. I can't forgive this person who hurt me so deeply." Or take care of someone else's spiritual health. "If I only had a little more faith, maybe then I could pull it off."

Luke, reminding us who Jesus is, tells us the Lord replied to their request for more faith with a motivational talk. First, he says to them, "If you had the faith the size of a mustard seed [that's mighty small], you could say to this tree to be uprooted and planted in the sea and it would obey you." In other words, don't use your small faith as an excuse for not obeying. You can do this by faith. A person with faith the size of a mustard seed can do some amazing things that they thought were impossible. Now Jesus is not talking about the power of positive thinking or working up some intense believing from within yourself. And he's not describing faith in yourself as the world sometimes teaches us to do, or faith in money or faith in the goodness and ability of people. No, he's talking about faith in God. Faith is a total dependence on God and a willingness to do his will, trusting in him totally. The size and greatness of your faith does not matter. The size and the greatness of the one who is the object of your faith is what really matters, Jesus is telling us. And God is so big and capable of doing anything He desires. So, faith is a power because it's the link to the power of God. It's God's

means of salvation and forgiveness, right? Saved by grace, through faith. And if you're trusting in Christ, you have God, the Holy Spirit working in you, and He can empower you to carry out Christ's orders. Even a little faith in a big God can lead to some amazing things getting done for the Kingdom of God. So, keep your focus on his greatness and carrying out his orders, trusting in him who knows what he's talking about and really can do amazing things in you and through you. I'm reminded of the Apostle Paul in Philippians. He talked about the secret, his secret of getting through all kinds of life circumstances as he served the cause of the gospel, plenty and want and so on. He said, "I can do all things through him who strengthens me."

Next, in this little motivational talk, Jesus tells them why we must obey him. He appeals to the common Middle Eastern understanding of how servants and masters relationally operate with one another. He tells this parable. He says, just imagine this if you can, He says, "Who among you would say to your servant who's just come in from the field, come sit at the dinner table with me?" Now I can picture the disciples smirking at the thought of this because this would never happen in their culture. "Now," Jesus said instead, you'd say, "Go prepare supper for me and serve me while I eat and drink. And then you can go and eat and drink." And the disciples were probably nodding in agreement with Jesus' assessment. Then Jesus goes on, and later He said, "Would you thank the slave for doing what was commanded? Of course not." They're shaking their heads I'm sure, "You and I know that's not the way things work in our world today, between masters and servants. So, you," as he points to his disciples, "also, when you have done all that you were ordered to do, say we are unworthy servants. We have only done our duty."

Now, what is Jesus saying here? He's telling us why we obey his orders. It's because He has authority over us. He is our master, our Lord, and we are His servants and servants obey. And our motivation in all of this is not to gain reward or thanks from our master. I can never put God in my debt that way. I don't obey to put God in my debt. No one could do that. But we do have a tendency, don't we, to think sometimes "God owes me if I serve and obey him." We'll see that attitude come out now and then when a hardship hits us. "Why is God letting this happen to me?" We wonder. "I've been faithful and obedient, working hard to do what he told me. God owes me better in this." Or when we pray. "Of course He's going to answer my prayer. I've been faithful and obedient to him. He owes me that." Or when we think of getting into Heaven, we respond. When asked, "How do you know?" You say, "Well, I've kept the

commandments pretty well, so God owes me that I deserve it." But Jesus says in this passage, you can never put God in your debt. You obey Him as His disciples because you are his servants. You're simply doing your duty. He owes you nothing. Your attitude to obeying his commands is I do this because of whose I am. I am his servant and very grateful for that. That's why the Apostle Paul describes himself to others in his letters as a bond servant, a slave, a servant, a prisoner of Christ. Because that's what you become when you trust in Christ Jesus as your Savior and Lord. Scripture tells me as a Christian that I've been bought with a price through what Jesus did for me at the cross at Calvary. Remember Martin Luther's second article of the Small Catechism, where he says,

At great cost, Jesus has saved and redeemed me, a lost, condemned person. He freed me from sin, death and the power of the devil; not with silver or gold, but with his holy and precious blood and his innocent suffering and death. And all this He has done that I may be his own and serve him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness.

Why then, would you and I follow through and obey his directives to witness and love unconditionally and worship Him and serve others in his name and forgive? Because trusting in Christ, we are His rescued and blessed servants. We have been recipients of His kindness and grace and obedience is our response, our grateful response to His grace working in our lives. I was a hell-bound lost person under severe masters – sin and death and the devil – until Jesus came and rescued me and made me his own. He's my gracious master who loves me and has been so good to me. Serving him and doing what he directs me to do in Scripture is a privilege. The Lord is our shepherd. I lack nothing, as a songwriter says, because of Jesus Christ, we have everything we need.

And saying that we are unworthy servants doesn't mean that we lack a proper sense of self-worth and self-love, or that we're worthless to God. Nothing could be further from the truth. We are of more value than many sparrows, remember Jesus said that, and that we're created in the image of God. We're the crown of His creation and Christ died to save us and make us His own. And our work for the Kingdom is valuable and pleasing in his sight. Scripture tells us that as well. In fact, a biblical commentator by the name of Kenneth Bailey, who's greatly respected for his work on Christ's parables, tells us that we can actually translate that word unworthy as "without need." In other words, I have no need of reward or thanks. I've got everything I need. I'm just glad to serve. It's a privilege. So, this is just a statement reflecting a humble gratitude, pointing

to all that's been done for us. We know we are not worthy of what God has done for us in Christ rescuing us to make his own. We deserve just the opposite. We were rebels, enemies who have been redeemed by his grace, through faith in Christ, who died as the perfect sacrifice for our sins. It's all grace. And so, we gratefully obey and serve him remembering the words "Amazing grace. How sweet the sound. That saved a wretch like me."

So, there you have it, my fellow disciples. Obedience is a big deal to Jesus we see here. And it's not always easy, but it is expected. And all of this that I've been describing is a tall order, I know: loving and looking out for others and forgiving freely and carrying out the great commission to make disciples of all people and living out the great commandment to love God with heart, soul, strength, and mind, and neighbor as myself, risking ridicule and isolation and being taken advantage of by others who stand outside the Kingdom of God. It's hard. Jesus never said it was easy. But we can do this, and we must, if we are to be his beloved disciples, Jesus says. Through faith in him who can do amazing things in us and through us as we call upon him for his power and help as we turn to him in prayer.

And he graciously picks us up when we fail him and he forgives us and sends us out again and again to do life his way as his own, empowering us with this spirit. And also, we do it remembering why – our motivation, the cross of Christ, we remember who we are in Christ, were graciously rescued. He bought us at a costly price. He has given us a rich and eternal inheritance and a glorious purpose in life to serve him, to actually follow in his footsteps of trusting God and obeying. How can I say then "No" to him when he tells me to do his good will, he's my master worthy of my all. Like Isaac Watts, the hymn writer testifies in the hymn *When I Survey The Wonderful Cross*,

Were the whole realm of nature mine
That were an offering far too small
Love so amazing, so divine
Demands my soul, my life, my all.

Now I'd like to end this message today with a story that I think captures the spirit of this passage we've just studied. It was told by a pastor, Gordon Johnson, after an experience he had at a church in Minneapolis, Minnesota. He writes

Many years ago, in the city of Minneapolis at Bethlehem Baptist Church, they needed a Sunday school teacher for the junior boys. This class wasn't bad, just

energetic. No teacher had been able to control them. Ewald Charlburg, a Swedish masseur, was asked to teach and he took the junior boys class. Ewald still had his Swedish accent; buzzing all over the church was the word "He'll never make it, three weeks and that'll be the end." But somehow Ewald believed God, and when he took the class, he obediently stayed with it through the years, he kept teaching the boys. Some years ago, I was asked to come to the church and share in a service. It was the 10th anniversary of the death of Ewald Charlburg. How do you like that? A layman in the church and they're celebrating the 10th anniversary of his death. During the service, they recounted that at least 40 men were in Christian service someplace in the world because Ewald Charlberg taught boys, loved them, and watched over them as they grew. He had faith to believe that God could overcome his human limitations. On the morning of that anniversary celebration, 27 laypeople stood up to say, "We're going to be like Ewald Charlburg in a small way." The obscure immigrant with a Swedish accent found significance as he trusted in the Lord and obeyed the call to serve him.

Isn't it amazing what can happen when God's people trust and obey? Let's pray. Father, we're you're grateful servants, praise you and thank you for your saving grace, for purchasing us and making us your own. We commit ourselves to be servants who will trust you and obey you and bring you glory and honor and praise. And we know we can't do this by our own power or strength. So, we ask that you fill us with your Holy Spirit's power as we strive to do your will. Amen.