
The sermon text for today is based on the Gospel, Luke Chapter 15, verses 5-10.

Provided by The Lutheran Church of Australia

Faith and Faithfulness

How would you react if your pastor suddenly announced to you that you didn't have to go to church any more? Nor did you have to put anything on the offering plate. Nor were you expected to read your Bible or be part of a study group. Nor did you have to serve God by helping in any of the church's ministries, living and sharing your faith, or loving and caring for others any longer.

Would you breathe a great sigh of relief and suddenly give it all up? Or would you keep going much the same as you are? It's an interesting thought. We would hope that our commitment to Christ and our fellow Christians would not be negatively affected by that announcement at all.

God does not want us to do all those things because we "*have to*", as if we are fulfilling some kind of duty or payment to God that will earn his favour. It's natural for the human mind to think like that. One man said quite openly after church one Sunday: "Well, I've paid my dues for another week!" There is, however, a real spiritual danger in thinking that we are fulfilling the requirements of faith – or being good Christians - just by doing what we consider to be our duty.

In our Bible text today, Jesus shows his disciples how faithful service to God begins with a correct understanding of what faith is. Jesus had just been telling his disciples about some of the difficult things they would encounter in their ministry. They had responded with a very noble request, "**Lord, Increase our faith** (v.5)." That noble request grew out of a motive that was equally as noble. They wanted to be able to do the things that Jesus was asking them to do.

In one sense, their request hit the nail right on the head. The main thing – the starting point – when it comes to serving God is not *duty*, but *faith*. God accepts us, not because of how good or faithful we have been in doing what he asks, but because we put our trust in the promises of God. The disciples were on the right track but Jesus wanted to teach them something more about faith. He went on to explain that the main thing about faith is not how big *our faith* is, but how big *our God* is. God, ultimately, is the one in whom faith puts its trust. That is why Jesus 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** (v. 6)

How can faith the size of a mustard seed move a mulberry tree – or a mountain as Jesus said on another occasion? It's because it isn't the faith itself that does the moving; it is God – the big, almighty, all-powerful God. Faith simply puts its trust in God, for whom nothing is impossible. In him, a mulberry tree, a mountain, or any other obstacle is no match for faith, even if it is the size of a mustard seed. The important thing is that we put our faith into practice, no matter how small it is. Being a Christian is all about embracing the precious promises in God's Good News and making

use of them, putting them into practice in our daily lives. That applies to our salvation in Jesus and to our lives as his children.

Faith is like a container, which God has given us, which holds all of his precious promises and the greatness of his power. Even a faith the size of a mustard seed still contains all the promises and power of the great and gracious God. To exercise our faith is to open that container, however small it is, and respond to his promises by trusting them.

Therefore, what we Christians do for God - worshipping, praying, reading, giving, serving, caring, and so on - is not done because of *have to's* or *expectations*. We serve Christ and others because of what God has done for us. God has given us faith in him. If your pastor told you that you don't *have to* do any of those things, there would be some truth in that. You don't *have to*! But he would hope that this wouldn't stop you doing them. He would hope that the love of Christ would compel you to put your faith into action; that you would *want to* respond to God's gracious promises. When Christ sets us free from requirements and expectations, he is not setting us free to do less for him. In fact, we may even find ourselves encouraged and enriched to do even more for him than we were doing beforehand.

After Jesus spoke to his disciples about putting their faith into action, he told a parable in order to warn them to always remain humble in their serving and, even when God works mighty things through them, to claim no special merit for their work. Just as the power to do God's work is not in the *size of our faith* but the *size of our God*, so any results that spring from faith must be credited to God and not to ourselves. Jesus said: **Suppose one of you had a servant ploughing or looking after sheep. Would he say to the servant when he comes in from the field, "Come along now and sit down to eat"? 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?** (v.7-9).

God is like the master who asks us, his servants, to do certain things for him in faith, but the fact that we do those things does not mean that we deserve any reward from our master. Jesus concluded: **So also you, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, "We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty"** (v.10). To think that any of us can, in some way, win God's favour or reward; or even earn a place in heaven just by "*doing our duty*", is to spoil God's grace completely.

Grace is a *free gift: undeserved love, and unmerited generosity*. If we turn our service of God into some kind of payment of dues, or expect it is our right to be rewarded for our faithful service, then we have cancelled out God's free gift of undeserved love in our hearts. We are deluding ourselves if we imagine that the Lord somehow owes us something for all our effort. None of us, no matter how great our service, deserve special treatment from our Lord.

But neither do we have reason to be upset about that. The good news is that we know our Lord comes to us, his unworthy servants, and serves us with his undeserved love. To the person who simply has faith, Jesus will say: ***Well done, you good and faithful servant... Come on in and share my happiness*** (Matt. 25:23). God richly rewards his faithful servants, not because of our duty but

because of our enduring faith that is active in works. We know we will continually fall short of what he asks us to do, but God will forgive the shortcomings of his servants who trust in him. He will reward us, not because we deserve it in any way, but because God is generous in constant love and mercy to all who call on him. It is because of the saving work of Jesus and not *our work* that he accepts and rewards us.

If anything, that wonderful news should inspire us to greater trust, greater love and greater faithfulness. We should welcome the announcement that sets us free from doing Christian works as a matter of *duty* or *expectation*, not because such an announcement frees us from Christian service, but because it sets us free to be the people God wants us to be. In that freedom, God's Spirit goes to battle within us against the inclinations of our sinful natures and inspires us to be ever more eager and fervent in worshipping, praying, reading and studying the Bible, giving, serving and caring for others, because of what God has done for us and because of what God can accomplish through us by means of our faith in Jesus – no matter how small it is! Amen!