



¹Jesus said to His disciples: "Things that cause people to sin are bound but woe to that person through whom they come. ²It would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a millstone tied around his neck than for him to cause one of these little ones to sin. ³So watch yourselves.

"If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him. ⁴If he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times comes back to you and says, 'I repent,' forgive him." ⁵The apostles said to the Lord, "*Increase our faith!*" ⁶He 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.

⁷"Suppose one of you had a servant plowing or looking after the sheep. Would he say to the servant when he comes in from the field, 'Come along now and sit down to eat'? ⁸Would 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'? ⁹Would he thank the servant because he did what he was told to do? ¹⁰ So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.' "

Digging up a tree *with its roots* can be quite the task! In fact, when people have trees cut down, they don't even bother to try to dig up the roots; they're satisfied just to chew up the trunk and hope the roots rot over the years. But every now and then, you see those *Trees-on-the-Move* transporting trucks with a huge de-vice for digging up *smaller* trees by their roots—trees not much bigger than 30 feet. They certainly couldn't handle digging up the 60-foot trees you have in your backyard!

In our text, Jesus teaches that if we had the faith in Him the size of a mustard seed, we'd be able to tell a mulberry tree, **"Be uprooted & planted in the sea!"** This comment was intended to illustrate the power of God which stands behind even the smallest of genuine faith in Christ Jesus. Jesus is *not* implying that we should all go home after today's worship service and try commanding our backyard tree to uproot itself and plant itself in the Rock River or Tripp Lake, just to test how great our faith is. Jesus is not promoting non-sense for you to prove to yourselves how deeply you believe in Him by attempting to tell trees what to do!

Instead, the illustration of uprooting the tree is a teaching device—an example by which we can under-stand the great power of God when it is at work in our hearts for godly reasons. Jesus provides 2 applications which "sandwich" that little parable. One application deals with ¹*our interpersonal relationships as Christians*-- particularly having the power to avoid *causing or taking offense*, as well as the power to *keep forgiving when we are hurt*. The other application deals with ² *the power to serve God humbly, gratefully, & continually with-out complaining*.

Those sorts of behaviors do not come to us naturally, apart from the Holy Spirit. Instead, our natural tendency, heavily influenced by our sinful nature, *upsets relationships* ¹ by causing offense through tasteless, crude, thoughtless, or uncaring behavior and words or ²by taking offence where offence wasn't intended or by holding grudges and refusing to forgive. Even more, our sinful nature further urges us to grumble about serv-ing God or our fellowman because it would much rather *serve just ourselves* and our own wants. We're not of a natural bent to do God's work.

As the disciples realized the scope of what Jesus was teaching and the power needed to do the sorts of godly things He was talking about, they implored Him, **"Increase our**

faith!” As we consider the nature of our hearts compared to “tree-moving” faith, we, too, realize that we *don’t* have faith even the size of a mustard seed. WE, too, join the apostles and eagerly implore Jesus, “**Increase OUR faith!**...Give US a faith that more *readily forgives, that doesn’t take offence so quickly, or that serves God & others more humbly, consistently, & gratefully* above our own preferences. That kind of faith, fostered by the Holy Spirit, really delights in God’s great patience, forgiveness, & service towards us!” With that in mind, let’s consider how God can increase our faith so that we can respond and **Pull Up Mulberry Trees By God’s Power behind Faith!**

* *Don’t Cause Careless Offense*

* *Forgive as You have been forgiven by God (and don’t bear grudges)*

* *Serve God Humbly and Gratefully in Faith, without grumbling!*

Jesus began our text by stating, “**Things that cause people to sin are bound to come.**” In our sinful world, filled with all sorts of enticements to defy God’s will and care only for our own selves, *temptations “are bound to come.”* It’s the very nature of sin to spread among people because it appeals to our selfish nature. It would be easier to rake leaves on a windy Fall day than to stop temptations and sinful thinking from invading our hearts and lives. Over & over we’re told by society around us, which rebels against God: *Do what YOU want to do... If it feels good, then it’s okay to do it...Don’t let anyone tell YOU what is right or wrong!...You are responsible only to yourself!*

This self-indulging philosophy has so saturated our society’s mentality that a sense of responsibility & accountability to God and to the Bible is not just ignored, it is even mocked. The concept of something being a SIN or an OFFENSE to Almighty God, the sense of a need to repent and confess such sin, and the importance of seeking forgiveness & renewal in the cross of the Savior is considered a waste of time. So *what happens, in-stead?: insensitivity & hard-heartedness* towards God, and, as a result, *insensitivity & aloofness* towards our fellowman. As we become absorbed in our desires and plans, it begins to affect our relations & dealings with God & others – using, abusing, or ignoring them for our selfish gain. We don’t care if it hurts or offends them or God, or if it leads us into outward sin.

Jesus particularly warns of offending “little ones.” Some interpret “little ones” as being “those who are immature or new in the faith.” But let’s just imagine it referring to youngsters. What might be examples of us offending youngsters? Perhaps ¹ a child tells an adult (even a parent) that s/he “should go to church and worship Jesus, our Savior, who died on the cross for our sins,” to which the adult responds indifferently or negatively, causing the little one to be confused why the adult/parent would not honor Jesus. Or maybe ² the little one hears teens or adults using profanity and filthy language, or telling dirty jokes, and the little one feels that s/he can speak that way, too. Examples on the *adult* level may often be ³ in the realm of enticing another into sexual activity that violates the way God wants us to use sex for securing our marriages & procreating within a family setting. Or ⁴ they could entice someone into lying, cheating, or getting things dishonestly. That’s the point Jesus makes when saying: **Woe to that person through whom they [temptations] come. ²It would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a millstone tied around his neck than for him to cause one of these little ones to sin. ³ So watch yourselves.**

You begin to “**pull up that [mulberry] tree**”—i.e. to reveal true faith working in you—when your goals are not selfish but demonstrate concern for someone else’s welfare, well-being, & saving faith in Christ. Now that’s a mighty deed in God’s eyes! That’s an attitude that only the power of faith in Christ can give & maintain in you. And as that earnest

desire for others' souls and relationships-with-God grows more deeply in your heart, Jesus describes another way to "***pull up mulberry trees***": **If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him. If he sins against you 7 times in a day, and 7 times comes back to you and says, 'I repent,' forgive him!**"

It certainly is not easy to forgive & let go when you've been deeply offended & hurt, much less have to forgive as much as Christ tells us to do. Our natural sin-polluted self prefers to yield to Satan's temptation to *get weary of forgiving* over-&-over, or to *retaliate*, or *hold a grudge*. Husbands & wives, parents & children, and brothers & sisters particularly are in situations and relationships where abundant, ongoing forgiveness is critical to successful, enduring relationships. It takes a *strong* mustard-seed-sized faith, which understands and deeply treasures God's forgiving mercy to us, in order to overpower and uproot the temptation to "*get even*" or "*hold a chip on your shoulder*."

Genuine forgiveness of others can only come as we really grasp God's forgiveness of us. Imagine if God would secretly take a video of you for an entire month – your life and behavior in private and among others – and play it back for you *and* the world to see at every movie theater. What *sins, foolishness, vanity, and bla-tant selfishness* would cause you to hide your head in shame or be totally embarrassed how others saw you? What *sins* would you have *forgotten*? What would be seen about you that you *didn't do which you should have*? What *public* sins would we see? What *secret* sins would be exposed? What sins would everyone see of your *tongue*?...of your *eyes*?...of your *ears*?...of your *hands*? What *hypocrisy* would we view? Or what if God exposed all your dark, ugly, self-centered *thoughts*?—filled with coveting, jealousy, lust, greed, vengeance, etc.

Honesty admits with the Psalmist: **If you, O Lord, kept a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand? But with You is forgiveness, therefore You are feared.**^{Ps.130:3-4} It's also a relief to hear God say "**As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us.**"^{Ps.103:12} That verse didn't say that God *ignored* or *overlooked* our sins. It says He REMOVED them. How? By placing them all on the back of His beloved, eternal Son, then sending Him to the cross to bear our damnation-curse. And Jesus willingly did this. He didn't begrudge paying for your & mine damning guilt. He didn't claim, "It's not fair that I have to pay the penalty of your sins!" Rather, **as a lamb before its shearers is silent, so He did not open His mouth. He was wounded for our transgressions and crushed for our iniquities... By His wounds we are healed.** (read Isaiah 53)

Now you've got a reason for forgiving: *God has forgiven you all your offenses and abuses of Him through Christ.* Therefore, to be so freely, fully, and undeservedly forgiven, yet to harbor continuing resentment and un-forgiveness towards one's fellowman raises serious questions about how genuine and true one's faith, love, and thanks to the Savior are. And because God wants us to realize how important this whole matter of FOR-GIVING is to Him, Jesus declared in His *Sermon on the Mount*: **If you do not forgive men their sins, neither will your Father forgive your sins.**^{Mt. 6:14f}

Does this help you understand more fully why the disciples implored Jesus to "**Increase our faith!**" after Jesus had spoken about "*forgiveness*"? *When we lose sight of—or take for granted—how Jesus set aside all bitter resentment that He could rightfully hold against us and, instead, suffered in agony to absorb our di-vine penalty of hell, then we show complete ignorance of God's grace & have no paradigm & incentive to forgive others.*

But there is still one last issue that Jesus addressed in which our faith can pull up more mulberry trees. Jesus said it this way: **Suppose one of you had a servant plowing or looking after the sheep. Would he say to the servant when he comes in from the field, 'Come along now and sit down to eat'? ⁸Would 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'? ⁹ Would he thank the servant because he did what he was told to do? ¹⁰So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.'

The message is really quite simple: a servant (paid worker in our case) does his duty BECAUSE IT'S HIS DUTY! If part of this servant's "job description" included working in the fields AND preparing & serving sup-per, then he has no case to make in saying that *he* deserves to eat *before* the one who is paying him and for whom he works. Just because he does the job that he is paid to do does not mean he can expect preferential treatment or rewards! Does your boss or employer give you preferential treatment, or shower you with thanks & special adulation, if you are doing the tasks for which he hired you? I doubt it. It's expected of you. That's what you agreed to do for the pay he gives you!

In this parable, the servant was not at all expecting anything special. Rather, in humility, he con-sidered these tasks *his duty*. He did not complain, go on strike, claim "unfair labor practices," picket his master's house, or rebel. His heart was not motivated by selfish wants but by ¹an *appreciation* for his master and ²a *free will to serve* him in devotion, realizing that he was being cared for in this life.

We are tempted to act differently than this servant. We are tempted to feel that everyone around us OWES US something in the way of special recognition, rewards, perks, etc. We are also tempted to feel that God should give us what we think we deserve for being good, dedicated, hard-working Christians—perhaps doing lots of things for the church and going to worship every Sunday. But what is Christ teaching us to say, after we may be tempted to admire our attendance, our seeming endless work at church, & all the hours we've spent for God in our lives? **"We are unworthy servants. We have only done our duty."**

Wow! That takes a *heap of humility & faith to say that!!* Having to serve Christ FIRST and ourselves LAST is *not at all* appealing to our sinful nature. We need faith the size of a mustard seed to uproot resent-ment & complaining in our lives of ongoing service for Christ and, instead, to see the eternal privilege we have to serve God, who faithfully & abundantly cares for us and who protects, preserves, upholds, forgives and makes us His forever. We need to say with the apostles: **"Increase OUR faith!"** St. Paul's comment to the Roman Christians ratifies this important, godly attitude: **Who has ever given to God that God should repay him? For from Him, and through Him, and to Him are all things. To HIM be the glory forever.** Rom.11:35-36

It's intriguing what Jesus says even a small, mustard-seed sized faith can do. It can resist temptation and strive to avoid giving or taking offense. It can forgive and put aside the sin when others have hurt or sore-ly offended us. It can serve God faithfully, willingly, abundantly, freely, and thankfully without complaining how much it has to do. Why not ask yourself throughout this next week: How many [mulberry] trees am I uprooting by the way I live? Is my faith uprooting and casting out my selfishness?...my worldly-mindedness? ...my godless desires and pursuits? While I might like to think that my faith is "just fine," is it rejoicing in my undeserved forgiveness and life in Christ, thankful to serve and yearning to be with Jesus forever in heaven?? How small, really, is my faith that I should be praying **"Increase my faith, LORD!"** ?

**Oh for a faith that will not shrink tho' pressed by many a foe,
That will not tremble on the brink of poverty or woe.**

That will not murmur nor complain beneath the chastening

rod,

But in the hour of grief or pain can lean upon its God.

**Lord, give us such faith as this and then, whate'er may come,
We'll taste, even now, the hallowed bliss of an eternal home.**

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Lord Jesus, King of kings who humbly and loving lowered Yourself to pay for the guilt and shame of our sins:

We come into Your presence with thanksgiving and into Your courts with praise. You have given us every reason to rejoice, to forgive, to live for others, and to serve You, but we have given You every reason to be sad. It is so much easier to praise You with our lips than with our lives. When our lives contradict the words of praise we speak and sing, forgive us, O Lord. So often we don't live to "pull up mulberry trees" – acting in ways that demonstrate saving faith overflowing to the world around us. We have been neglectful in witnessing of You and have hesitated to share in suffering for the Gospel. Not only have we surrendered to temptations but have been guilty of leading others into sin—active sins or sins of neglecting You. We have lacked the courage to evangelically correct our brothers and sisters in the faith, as well as been reluctant to forgive them when they are sorry to us. For these and other sins we have done, perhaps even ignorant of how we have hurt others, forgive us, Lord.

Increase our faith! Let us remember that Your forgiveness of us is not merely ignoring the evil, but that You endured the curse for our evil. How great is Your love! How important is "life" in You! Send us Your Holy Spirit to lead us in the ways of Your truth and love. Strengthen our faith—through our daily devotions, weekly worship, and repentant refreshment in Your Holy Supper—to believe that we can do all things through You, who gives us the strength. May we glorify Your name among our fellowman as we not only speak and sing Your praises, but as we live for You.