

Jesus said to his disciples: “Things that cause people to sin are bound to come, but woe to that person through whom they come.² It 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.

“If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him.⁴ If he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times comes back to you and says, ‘I repent,’ forgive him.”

⁵ The apostles said to the Lord, “Increase our faith!”

⁶ He 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’? ⁸ 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’? ⁹ Would 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.’” (NIV84)

Theme: Lord, lead us to do our duties.

Have you started a new job and soon realized you were way over your head? The summer after my Sophomore year at MLC my brother and I got a job building golf courses in Ohio. They asked us if we had any experience driving tractors. Being from Nebraska I had been on a tractor a few times and had moved some a few times. So the foreman pointed to a tractor, a 1950's era Allis-Chalmers and told me to take it to the other end of the course. Needless to say, I didn't quite know what I was doing—I was in over my head. It took me quite a long time to make it to the other side of the course.

As Christians we too have jobs we ought to do—it is to obey God's Word. But we are in way over our head; we are unable to always do our duties. So today we pray to God: Lord, lead us to do our duties.

Jesus told his disciples, **Things that cause people to sin are bound to come, but woe to that person through whom they come. It 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.** People will sin. We can't always control what other people do. But we can control what we do. And we can control what we lead others to do. And we don't want to lead any one to sin. We don't want them to think, say, or do something sinful. We don't want anyone to do something against God's Word. We don't want anyone to receive God's wrath and punishment. And we certainly don't want to be the reason they sinned against God. It would be better for us to face a horrible physical death than to lead other people to sin. So it is our duty to watch our life closely so we do not sin. It is our duty as Christians to make sure we don't lead other people to sin.

But people sin all the time. Sometimes they sin against us. It is then our duty to go and show him his sin. As Jesus says in verse 3, **If your brother sins, rebuke him.** We are to show someone that what he did or is doing is against God's will. And so it deserves God's wrath and punishment. It may not be pleasant to point out someone's sin. But it is our duty. It is the duty of every Christian—not just the pastor. Jesus says something similar in Matthew 18, **If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over.**

And our duty is not just to rebuke someone for sinning; it's also to forgive them when they repent. **If he repents, forgive him. If he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times comes back to you and says, ‘I repent,’ forgive him.** It is our duty to forgive and forgive often. We don't hold a grudge against someone. We don't try to get even, or hold their sin over their heads. Rather we assure them of the forgiveness Christ won for them. That through the suffering and death of Christ, their sins have been paid for. They will never return to haunt or condemn them. It doesn't matter how many times someone sins against us. If they repent we forgive them.

But that's a hard thing to do. We are offended when someone sins against us. And if someone were to sin against us over and over again

on the same day, we'd be more than offended. We would be quite angry. Most of us would doubt that this person truly was repentant. We probably wouldn't forgive the offender seven times. No, we may hold a grudge. We may try to get even. We would want him to feel the same way we felt. We would want him to suffer as he made us suffer.

As hard as it would be to forgive someone who sins against you many times a day, it is even harder to not lead someone into sin. But our actions may do just that. When we do something that God commands us not to do, such as gossiping—speaking bad about somebody, we may give the impression that it's ok to go against God will. Thus we cause others to sin. Or we can lead other people to think not doing something that God's wants us to is okay—like when we fail to go to Church or Bible study. Someone may see that and assume it's just fine to not worship God or learn more of his Word. Whether we try to or not, we often lead others to sin.

It would be hard to do these two duties. Not just hard, but impossible for us as sinners to do. It's hard to assure someone of forgiveness when they have done you wrong time and time again. It's hard enough to watch your own life, let alone making sure that our actions don't somehow make someone else sin. The disciples knew the problem too. So they asked Jesus, **Increase our faith!**

They figured that if they had a stronger faith they would live better lives. That if they had a stronger faith, they would not lead other people to sin. They thought that it takes a strong faith to forgive someone who has sinned against you. It is certainly not something Christians do all the time. It is something that we fail to do constantly. So the disciples prayed that God would give them the faith to do their duty.

Jesus answer is somewhat surprising. He told them that it doesn't take a strong faith at all. **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.** Even a small amount of faith is able to amazing things. Jesus isn't saying that if you have faith you would be able to transplant a mulberry tree. Go up to a tree and tell it to go plant itself out in the bay. No tree, no matter how small or large, is going to

listen to you. So what is Jesus saying? Those who have faith are able to do amazing things—things that seem impossible to human reason. Amazing things like: Living a holy life. And not leading people to sin. Having the courage to stand up for what is right by pointing out a sin—regardless of the consequences. It includes sharing the message of forgiveness through Christ when they repent.

It doesn't take a strong faith to do those things—just simply faith. Plus, it's our duty as Christians. That is Jesus' point in the parable he told to his disciples. He asked them a simply question. If you have a slave or a servant—would you allow him to sit down and eat before he finished his duties? Of course not. First you would expect him to finish his work outside, prepare a meal for you, and serve it to you. Then when all the work is done—then and only then would he be able to sit down and have a meal for himself.

That may seem a little harsh. But the master is not being mean. He is being fair. He only expects his servant to do what he is supposed to do. And the servant knows that. So the servant doesn't expect any special treatment. He doesn't even anticipate a 'thank-you.' It's his duty. He is simply doing what he is supposed to be doing.

Jesus makes the connection to us in verse 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.** We are servants of Christ. We are his slaves. A slave is one who has been purchased by his master. And he now belongs to him. That is the relationship we have with Christ. In the book of Revelation those in heaven sang this song to Christ, **You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation.** We say the same thing with Luther, who said in his explanation to the 2nd article of the Apostles Creed, "(Jesus Christ) has redeemed me, a lost and condemned creature, purchased and won me from all sins, from death and from the power of the devil, not with gold or silver, but with his holy, precious blood and with his innocent suffering and death."

At one point we belonged to the devil. We were born as enemies of God and children of Satan. But Christ snatched us away from Satan's grasp. He took us to be his own. So that we might live with him in his

kingdom. So now we belong to Christ. We are his. He is our master. We are his servants.

We are no longer slaves to sin. Before we could do nothing but sin. And our sin condemned us. Before, we were on our way to hell to suffer forever because of our sins. We were slaves to sin and death. But not any longer. We have been set free. As Paul points out in our second lesson for today, **you have been set free from sin and have become slaves to God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life.** We have been purchased by the blood of Christ. We have been set free from sin. And we no belong to him. Since we are free, we are now free to serve him. Paul says earlier in our second lesson, **You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness.** We no longer have to sin. Now we are free to obey God. We are free to do what is good and right in his eyes. We are free to show someone their sins. Free to assure them of forgiveness through Christ. We are now free to keep people from sinning. Free to show them a God-pleasing way to live. We belong to Christ—for he purchased and won us and adopted us to be his own. We are his slaves.

And has his slaves we willingly want to obey him. He doesn't force us to obey him. He doesn't want us to do what is right because we feel forced into it. Or to obey his law out of fear of punishment. Rather he uses his love to lead us to obey him. We strive to do what he commands because he first showed love to us. Out of love for him we serve him. And we do it willingly. For it is our duty as Christians. And we don't expect anything in return. We don't require a thank-you. We don't need special treatment. Even if we actually do our duties, we are still sinners. As Isaiah says, **our righteous acts are like filthy rags,** Even the good that we do is sinful and needs to be washed by the blood of Christ. And so even if we do what is right we still say to God, **'We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.'** We are unworthy sinners, so we don't brag or boast about what we have done. We only strive to do our duties as God's children. And when we fail we look to Christ and the forgiveness he so freely gives to us. For through him and him alone we are made worthy in God's sight.

When I started that job, I was in way over my head. But that didn't keep me from striving to get better. Eventually I figured it out. I moved on to newer, better, and much bigger tractors.

As Christians we too are over our head when it comes to doing our duties. But that doesn't keep us from trying to obey God. And when we do accomplish our duty we won't brag or boast about it, but humbly say to God, **'We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.'** We know that we won't completely figure things out—we will still sin again and again. So we fall back on Christ who has purchased and won us by the shedding of his blood. For we are his servants, purchased so that we may live under Christ in his kingdom forever. Amen.