

## [Luke 17:5-10](#)

There is a controversial personality type test called the Myers Briggs Type Indicator. Broadly speaking, it locates a person in one of sixteen different personality types.

And I once came across a document that contained a one-line prayer for each of the sixteen types<sup>1</sup>. There is someone I know for whom the prayer would be

Lord, help me to relax about insignificant details beginning tomorrow at 11:41.23 am.

Someone else I know would probably own this prayer:

God help me to take things more seriously, especially parties and dancing.

And there is someone else I am close to for whom I think their prayer would be this one:

God, help me to keep my mind on one th-Look a bird-ing at a time.

I suppose you want to hear mine? I'm not sure I should tell you, but it's this:

Lord, keep me open to others' ideas, WRONG though they may be.

When I read today's passage, though, I had a sense it was like that 'God, help me to keep my mind on one th-Look a bird-ing at a time' prayer.

Why? It flits from one thing to another. It starts with the subject of faith but before you know it, the passage is about servanthood. And even within the parable about the servants, you start off as the master and end up as the servant. Look, a bird!

Our problem is that the Lectionary has taken a chunk out of context. These verses belong in a part of Luke's Gospel where discipleship is being discussed. Luke hasn't necessarily ordered the material chronologically here, he has simply collected some of Jesus' basic teaching on what it means to be a disciple.

So you could say that today's reading is part of a Discipleship 101 course. This is an introduction to discipleship. It's discipleship basics. And the two basic elements of discipleship taught here are faith and servanthood.

**Firstly, then, *faith*:**

<sup>5</sup>The apostles said to the Lord, 'Increase our faith!'

<sup>6</sup>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.'

Just taking these verses as they stand, the apostles ask for more faith and Jesus says, well you've just got to start exercising the small amount of faith you already have.

I think that's important. Some of us just sit there waiting for God to increase our faith when Jesus tells us to get on with the faith we already have and if we put that into practice then things will happen.

In other words, you don't build up muscle without exercise. So exercise the faith you have, even if it doesn't seem like much, and over time it will grow.

As the missionary pioneer to China, Hudson Taylor, put it:

You do not need a great faith, but faith in a great God.<sup>2</sup>

For some of us, it is time to get out of the pews and start putting our faith in action. We have that 'faith in a great God', for we believe amazing things about our God. It is time to take what we hear on Sunday morning and put it into practice on Monday morning.

All the stuff about a mulberry tree being uprooted and planted in the sea is more of Jesus' cartoon language to make a point. One writer puts it this way:

The best analogy I have heard is that faith is like a tow rope used by one car to pull another car up a hill. If the second car won't move, then it is no good attaching a stronger rope; what matters is the vehicle the rope is attached to! In a similar way, it is not the strength of our faith that is the issue; the question is, who is our faith placed *in*?<sup>3</sup>

So you have to take the handbrake off in the second car! Even if you don't need a tow rope to move a car, you still have to take the brake off and start moving if you are to steer the car.

For us, this means we need to get on with those basic actions of faith and not just sit around waiting for something magical to change us. Only when we start moving with the actions of faith will our faith move and grow.

In fact, although as I said Luke puts a lot of different pieces of Jesus' teaching together in this part of his Gospel, there is a real possibility the apostles' request for increased faith relates to what has come immediately before our passage today. For you could translate their words not so much as 'Increase our faith' as 'Give us this kind of faith'. What kind of faith? It must be what immediately precedes it.

So what does come straight before the apostles' words? The answer is some teaching of Jesus on what to do when people sin against us (verses 3-4). First, says Jesus, you rebuke them. Jesus wasn't a doormat! There's nothing wrong in saying to somebody, you wronged me. Then, if they repent, you forgive them. And even if they continue to sin but continue to repent you still go on forgiving them.

Well, the apostles realise, I think, that to rebuke someone for their sin but then forgive them when they are repentant requires more faith than they presently have. We know a couple of them quite fancied calling fire down from heaven on opponents, and we know Peter wielded a sword in Gethsemane. They know they need more faith in order to forgive. And Jesus says, you have a little bit of faith. Start with that. As you exercise it, that faith will grow.

Take the handbrake off. Begin to move.

Where is God calling us to release the brakes on our faith? Is it in forgiveness? Or is it in some other area?

### **Secondly, *servanthood*:**

So – what do we make of Jesus' little parable about the servant who works when his master is away and cannot rest when the master comes home?

Let's put aside all our Downton Abbey images about the team of servants downstairs, because this single servant in Jesus' story does everything. One moment he is doing the physical labour of a farmer – either ploughing or shepherding – and then when the master comes home, he is both the butler and the chef. That is one demanding job description!

So at first hearing it sounds like a recipe for relentless, hard work.

And not only that, what do we make of the conclusion where Jesus says that servants should simply say, “We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty”? How does that go down with someone who has low self-esteem? Isn’t that contradictory to all the emphasis on the outrageous love and grace of God that we saw only two chapters earlier in the Parable of the Prodigal Son?

It's important to recognise that Jesus is addressing a different concern here. Jesus is making sure that we don’t enter into Christian discipleship as if it’s a ticket to prosperity and status, let alone celebrity. No Christian belongs on a pedestal. Only Jesus does.

The point is this: we have a simple calling as disciples. It is to do what pleases our Master, Jesus. In Ephesians 5:10, Paul tells his readers to ‘find out what pleases the Lord’ – with the assumption that if they have found out what pleases him, they will then do it. That is our calling here, in today’s reading, according to Jesus. In a world where we are encouraged to please ourselves, our goal as Christians is to please Jesus.

We have four Gospels that tell us what pleases Jesus. There are plenty of things we can get along with, many of them the commonplace actions of everyday life with the important rider of how we go about them in contrast to other people. It isn’t that difficult to know a lot of the things that please him.

Perhaps our problem is best stated by Mark Twain. He said it was less the parts of the Bible that he didn’t understand that troubled him, and more the parts that he did understand. I suspect it’s like that for many of us with the teaching of Jesus. There are some very plain and challenging elements to his teaching that we wished said something else so that we didn’t have to comply. But they don’t.

Does any of us, then, face a dilemma where if we’re honest the choice is between claiming our own rights or privileges or status on the one hand and pleasing Jesus on the other? For me, I remember a friend of mine who told me he knew he couldn’t offer for the ministry until he was married. So I thought, I won’t answer that call until I’m married. But God wouldn’t let me put conditions on how I responded to what he wanted of me.

Do any of us say things like that to Jesus? I’ll only do x for you if you do y for me. We don’t get to set the terms. Because we follow One who gave up all those rights and privileges he had as the eternal Son of God to serve and to

bring salvation. It is wrong for us to cling onto status in preference to serving Jesus.

**In conclusion**, then, this basic course in discipleship is one where Jesus issues two simple but important challenges to us.

Firstly, we need to stop waiting for God to dispense the spiritual equivalent of fertiliser on our faith if it is to grow. Instead, we need to exercise our faith muscles if we want our faith to grow. We need to get moving in faith if we are to get up to speed.

Secondly, we have a simple mission in life which is to find out what Jesus likes and then to please him. We cannot allow our pride to get in the way. The call to be servants is paramount, and it shapes everything we do.

How are we doing with our discipleship basics?

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<sup>1</sup> <https://faculty.georgetown.edu/jod/texts/mbprayers.html>

<sup>2</sup> <https://quotefancy.com/quote/1491446/James-Hudson-Taylor-You-do-not-need-a-great-faith-but-faith-in-a-great-God>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.psephizo.com/biblical-studies/does-jesus-treat-us-as-good-for-nothing-slaves-in-luke-17/>