

The Rev. Billy Cerveny:

Have a seat.

All right, on the golf tournament weekend, we got a good crowd. I'm impressed. Very well done, I don't know how many of y'all went, but that's just pretty good, so I love it. And for those of you who are just visiting, welcome. It's good to see some new faces. My name's Billy Cervany. If I've not met you, I'm one of the priests here, and you're at the River Service. A bunch of years ago, I was in the music business, and I was telling a story to a buddy of mine the other day, and I was telling him the worst gig that I ever played, hands down the worst gig I ever played. I was before I made my first record, and I was playing these cover gigs. So I'd go into these, I was living in Atlanta, and I'd go to these sports bars where they just slung chicken wings, and I would play four hours a night, from like 10 p.m. to 2 a.m., and by the end of it, my guitar smelled like a chicken wing and a beer that someone had poured into it. But it was a way that I learned a lot, and you'd get paid a couple hundred bucks to do something like this, but you know what? That was a lot of money in those days. And one day, a friend of mine called me and said, "Hey man, I've got this gig in Gainesville, Georgia, "that I can't do, it's \$250." And that was a lot of money to me back then, and he said, "Well, you take it." And I said, "Great." And he goes, "It's at Taco Mac." Yes, Taco Mac, which is kind of a sports bar up in Gainesville. So I went up there, 250 bucks, I get up there, I arrive at the place. As you can imagine, it was everything that you would imagine it to be in Gainesville, Georgia. It was packed to the walls. And one of the advantages of doing this is they give you a free meal. So I went and I sat up at the bar, and I sat on the bar stool and looked at the menu, and I ordered the tuna steak. A tuna steak at a Taco Mac in Gainesville, Georgia. Not a good call, people.

Worst culinary decision of my life.

All I know is I started my first set, again, it's 10 o'clock, I'm about to go till 2 a.m., and all of a sudden, I'm in the midway through my first song, and my stomach starts doing things the stomachs aren't supposed to do. And I start sweating. And my body, and I can hear my heart beat in my ear, and I realize I had food poisoning.

And I'm on stage, what do you do? You're on stage. So I'm up there, I'm halfway through Brown Eyed Girl or whatever it was, doing the song, and I'm like, this ain't happening. I'm about to get sick. So I take my guitar off, I'm like, going through the crowd, all of a sudden, I walk through, and it's like slow motion, it's packed. These people are like, hey, man. I'm like face palming people out of the way. I get to the worst men's room in all of Georgia. I walk in, I kick open the door, and there's this dude leaning against the sink, smoking a cigarette, he's like, hey, you're the music dude, ain't you? And he wants to have this conversation. I push him out, I'm like, you gotta leave. Lock the door, pull myself together. And I'm like, okay, I've gotta do this. I gotta get back through these four hours. So somehow I managed to get back on stage, and I made it through four hours, all right? A lot of breaks, as you can imagine. Four hours, and I go back afterwards, I go to the bartender, and I said, hey, I'm done. I get my check. She hands me the check. She said the manager had to leave, but gave me the check. And I opened it up, and it was for \$200.

I said, no, ma'am, this was supposed to be for \$250. And she goes, I'm sorry, that's not my deal. I was so mad.

This guy had shortchanged me, and I didn't know what to do. She wasn't the guy, so the next day I called. I called the guy, and I left the voicemail. He didn't call me back. I called him again, and I went

psycho. I mean, I'm gonna call it, and call it, and call it. It was just the principle of it. He finally calls me back like three days later, and I said, hey, man, I really enjoyed playing at your place besides the food poisoning and all that, but I wouldn't recommend the tuna steak.

But I was told this was a \$250 gig, and you gave me 200 bucks, and he goes, oh, yeah. That deal's with your friend. I didn't make that deal with you. Sorry, man.

You ever felt that way?

That's my worst place if I feel like I'm being taken advantage of, because I did the work.

I mean, I did my four hours on the bar stool. Not only did that, that guy didn't know how much I powered through. He didn't know I earned that \$250, but he wouldn't do it, and I was just incensed.

I went beyond, and that dude owed me. Have you ever felt that way?

Have you ever felt that way in church?

Have you ever felt that way with God?

This idea that I'm doing my part.

I'm not perfect, but I come to church, and I tithe, and I show up, and I go to Bible studies, and I pray, and I do the things that I'm supposed to do, and I've done my time on the bar stool. I've honored my commitment.

And doesn't God reward the faithful?

Because sometimes I feel like I get shortchanged.

God was coming in, and I was supposed to get \$250 worth of blessings and peace, but I got \$150 here.

And somehow the things in my life aren't unfolding the way that I thought they should.

God, you're not providing for me, or I had to end up with this tune to stake from Gainesville, Georgia.

Now, if you feel that way, I got a compassion for you, because it's a familiar feeling to me.

But I gotta tell you, it's kind of a warped feeling.

It's a warped place because it's easy to confuse our faithfulness, the things that we do, that we think we're doing for God. It's easy to confuse my faithfulness with leverage.

And if I do this thing, God, you owe me. That I'm doing my part, and if I don't get what I think I should, God starts feeling like that shady bar manager that's shortchanging me.

So what does God say about that? Like, what does the gospel say about that? We just read this passage in the book of Luke. It's chapter 17.

And it's kind of strange, because Jesus, he's talking to his apostles.

And he's getting in with his apostles, and they come to him, and they say, and they're these loyal guys who have left everything that they have to follow Jesus. And they come to him and they say, they're just trying to be faithful. It says, verse five, it says, "To the Lord, Lord, increase our faith."

"And the Lord said to them, 'If you had faith like a grain of mustard seed, 'you could say to the mulberry tree, 'be uprooted, and be planted in the seed, it'd happen."

Okay, and then he takes this hard left turn into this weird story. He's saying that, you know, Jesus takes this turn where he says, "Imagine that you have a servant "that comes in from the field, "and he does everything that he was supposed to have done. "He lives up to his end of the commitment, "and would you reward him by sitting him down and serving him dinner?

"And you serving him?" He's like, "No, you wouldn't." "No, you would sit down, you'd have dinner, you'd have him dress appropriately, serve you, "and then when you're done, he would eat."

And all of a sudden you're like, wait, what is this about? How do these things fit together?

See, when you read this story,

Jesus is pushing into what the apostles are asking.

He's digging into something that's going on in their hearts. It's a little deeper. He's addressing their misunderstanding about the nature of faith,

and he's also addressing their misunderstanding about the nature of grace. Let me take these one at a time, because we'll walk through it. What is this thing about faith with him?

See, faith is this kind of central idea, right? And the apostles have walked with Jesus, they've seen his power, they've seen what he can do, they know who they're beginning to realize who he is, and how Jesus calls them to believe. And they're trying to be faithful, and it seems like it's an innocent question. Will you please increase our faith?

Like, what's wrong with that? And Jesus, just to be clear, Jesus, they already believe in him.

They're not asking for them to have a faith, they don't already exist. What they're asking for is take the faith that we have, make it bigger, it's quantitative.

And Jesus kind of pushes back on that.

Now I wonder why, because faith, it's kind of central in scripture, right?

You can't read the Bible and not find to where we're not called to faith.

We're saved by faith.

We're to walk by faith. When we come to the communion table every week, it says we feed on him in our hearts by faith. We are the people of faith.

And if a little bit is a good thing, then a lot of it is gotta be good.
Because if we have a lot of it, God will move, right?

And Jesus pushes back, and he says, guess what?

It's not about that. All you need is faith the size of a mustard seed.

Just a little bit, and you can do the miraculous. So what he's saying, Jesus is saying, is it's not about the amount of faith you have, the size of faith you have, okay?

Then what he must be saying is it must be about the kind of faith I have, the quality of faith I have. That it's gotta be pure, I have this pure faith, it's gotta be made of the right ingredients.

It's gotta be like uranium. If I have just a little bit of it, just a little bit of the right kind, boom, I get big results. If I have just a little bit of the right kind of faith,

then boom, God will move.

The problem is this: how do I get that kind of faith?

And what's in that kind of, what's the recipe for that kind of faith? What are the secret 11 herbs and spices that go into that kind of faith? Because I don't fully understand what that means.

And it's confusing.

And that's why Jesus is.

pushing back on both of those perspectives.

So what's he getting at?

So what I wanna do, I wanna back up a little bit. I think if we wanna understand what Jesus' point is, we gotta understand what faith is. Face one of these words we whip around a lot, right? Gotta have faith.

George Michael even sung about it, right, in the 80s.

But we live by faith, we walk by faith. Faith is this huge thing that we're supposed to have.

The first thing I wanna give us our definition is, faith is this, it's when I, it's two parts. The first part is this: it's when I believe that someone or something outside of myself can accomplish something that I need.

That's it, I believe something outside of myself or someone else can accomplish something I need. And the second part of faith is that when I actively entrust myself to that someone or something to do that thing. Pretty simple, that's an act of faith. And there's a couple things that we need to realize about it. The first thing is this: we are prisoners of faith.

We are constantly moving and living in faith. It's not a question of if you're exercising faith at any given moment, you are always constantly faithing. We are prisoners of faith.

And some, you're doing it right now. See, sometimes we do it in basic ways and sometimes we do it in deep ways. In basic ways is this, that you come into a church and you say, I have a need, I need to sit down. I am going to put my. I believe that there is something

here that I will trust that if I put my weight on it, I will sit on this pew and it'll hold me up. As I sit down, I am practicing faith in that moment, right? It's a simple act of faith. We always do it.

But then there's deeper versions of that.

See, we all have these needs

and we all have these longings in our hearts, right? Oh man, they're so deep.

It's men, we hate that word needs. We got them to be loved.

I wanna be seen.

I wanna feel like I'm cared for. I wanna feel safe.

I wanna feel like I'm enough.

And I'm constantly placing our faith in things outside of ourselves to meet those needs.

And when we put our faith in things that weren't designed to meet those needs, it becomes a problem.

When I asked something to do for me, it was never designed to do for me.

If I go to my job or my bank account or even my marriage or my children, I ask them to fill me up to do for me what only God can do.

Not only will I crush that thing with my expectations, I will live woefully disappointed

because I put my faith in the wrong thing. This is why faith is so important because we are constantly exercising it. And that's why Jesus is hammering them all about this and saying, no, no, no, no, no, you gotta understand this.

Because it's so important and you don't wanna misdirect it because we're prisoners of faith. The second thing we need to understand about faith is this.

There's no power in faith.

What?

Like isn't faith the thing?

Here's what I mean.

See, we talk about faith like it's an end in and of itself.

That faith is the goal. You gotta have faith, man. You gotta have faith.

But what does that mean? Like have faith in what?

Like put my faith in what? There is no power in faith itself.

The power that we're searching for is in the object of your faith. And that thing in which you are putting your trust, that's where the power is. The power is not in my faith. Let me give you an example. Imagine I had a light bulb, all right? And it's a perfectly beautifully functioning light bulb. How do light bulbs work? Is there any power in the light bulb? No.

Light bulbs don't function the way that they're meant to function unless electricity comes and you join it to that light bulb, right?

The problem is this.

The power, the electricity, it's in the wall.

And I can't jump, jump. I can't do that.

So what I do is I have this wire that goes from this light bulb into the power source and it's on this wire, the power travels along, the electricity travels along, it hits the light bulb and it lights it up. And now everything's functioning the way it was supposed to do.

Christians, you are the bulb.

Jesus is the power source in the wall.

And your faith is the wire.

The faith is the wire, there's no power in the wire.

There's no power in it at all.

But it's the thing that when we put it in Jesus, it's the thing on which the power of God flows into our hearts and lights us up.

It's what moves in us.

It's what fuels my prayer life. It's when that power comes in me, it's what opens my eyes that allows me to read scripture. It's what gives me an understanding of who I am and allows me to believe

that Jesus is who he says he is. It's the wire of faith that God uses and calls us to. Here's the problem with that.

I'm a sinful guy.

And rather than me taking that wire and giving it to Jesus, I wanna have full control over the power source.

As pious as it sounds, when the apostles say, increase my faith, what they're really saying is, build this muscle that I have of faith so I can flex it and God will move.

Give me this muscle of faith because if my faith is weak, God won't move. What's the bottom line of what he's saying here? Don't miss this.

When we think it's about our faith, don't miss this. What we're really saying is this, God moving or God not moving, it's on me.

It's on me.

It's how I exercise faith.

It's how I do this. It's whether I'm strong or not strong.

This is where you hear these twisted stories of people coming into churches with defects and with physical defects or brokenness so they can't see you, they can't hear, and people will come to them in this act of spiritual abuse and they say, if only you believed enough today, maybe God will heal you. You ever heard stories like this? That's true. That happens. And that is a lie from the pit of hell, and that is spiritual abuse.

And I pray you never hear that in your life, and you certainly won't hear it here.

It's a lie from the pit of hell, and it's one that Jesus is pushing back on, and he sees this and he's correcting the apostles about their misunderstanding of what faith is. And he's doing that because there was something deeper that they were missing here. They had a misunderstanding about what grace meant.

So the apostles and their perspective is saying, increase our faith. This is what's going on underneath it like this. It's what's going on in our hearts when we act like that. What we believe is that God requires faith.

So my job, like we just talked about it, is to produce and demonstrate that faith. And once I've produced it and I've demonstrated it long enough, I've done my part. I've done my time on the bar stool. I've done my hours. And guess what, God? You owe me now. You owe me.

You're in my debt.

Give me the life I deserve. Give me the healing I deserve. Give me the thing that I'm owed.

And really, underneath all of that, what we really think is what I'm owed is a trouble-free life. I am owed a life without pain. And when pain comes along, guess what happens? That's like opening that check, and I feel like I've been short of 50 bucks. I'm like, God, you're not living up to your bargain.

So Jesus tells this parable, the servant.

And the parable is the servant who goes to the field and does an honest day's work, and he comes in to the master's house, and he says, if that was your servant who was faithful and just did his task, when he came home, would you prepare him the meal? I just told you this a second ago. Would you prepare him the meal? No, you wouldn't. You'd sit down and have him prepare a meal for you.

No, and he would do what he was supposed to, he was just doing what he was supposed to do. He's not entitled. You'd get him to make your dinner, and then he could have his.

Okay? It's like, what's Jesus saying? Is that the Christian life? Because if that's, ugh.

That's not very appealing, is it?

See, the truth is, when Jesus is telling this parable, it's supposed to sting a little bit.

He's stirring the pot a little bit.

And what he's saying is this, he's saying, even if you did everything that God asked of you perfectly,

even if you lived up to every dot and you crossed every T of the law, you are not entitled.

Do you think that you doing what you're supposed to do puts the author and sustainer of life, the creator and the universe in your debt? The fact that you even exist is enough.

You're not entitled to anything.

Now, here's the real point that he's going to.

Just doing what you're supposed to do.

And we look at ourselves in this room,

we don't even do that.

I like to think of myself as the faithful worker in the field who came home after an honest day's work, but that's not who we are, is it?

We're the people that punch the clock and go take a nap behind the hay bale.

Or we're the people that go in and we think we're being faithful to God, we'll do kind of half our gig, but we're really kind of stuffing things in our pockets.

I'm using the company credit card to pay my own bills.

We think we're owed something just because we show up, but the message of the gospel is this,

the first part of the gospel is like, I can't be faithful. I'm not doing the gig like I'm supposed to do it. I didn't do a full four hours on the bar stool. I'm not owed it just for showing up.

And this is where the scandal of grace kicks in.

See this parable, it stings because it stirs our heart, but it's also a foreshadowing of something that come.

Because Jesus, he's the master, right? He's the master. He's the master of the house.

And as the master of the house, he is gonna gather the inconsistent and confused servants that he has in just a few short days, and he's gonna gather them around his table. And when he does that, he's gonna take off his outer garment and he's gonna wrap a servant's towel around his waist.

And Jesus is gonna kneel before them and he is going to wash their feet.

Jesus, the only person in history who did that all he was supposed to do, the only one who owes nothing will serve those who owe everything.

And when he climbs up on that cross and he dies for our sin, all the debts that we owed him, it is paid in full.

That is scandalous.

And when Jesus says, have faith the size of a mustard seed, what he's not saying is supercharge your faith.

He's not saying, give me those solid four hours on a bar stool so you can get the full amount that you're owed.

What he's saying is you can't generate this thing called the Christian life. You can't do it.

You were never meant to. You weren't designed to do it. Jesus is saying this, I am the Christian life. Not that I dispense the Christian life, not that I tell you how to get it, not that I'm gonna carve off a

piece of it for you. I'm saying, Jesus is saying, I am the Christian life. Take that faith that you have and plug it into me and me alone.

Plug it into me.

When I call you to faith, I'm not calling you to flex this muscle. I'm calling you to unburden your heart.

Surrender to the power of grace. Abide in me.

Quit trying to earn this. You can't. Quit trying to build this faith that you can't. That little bent, rusted wire that you have that you call faith, that's enough.

Because the power isn't about the wire that you have. It's about the power that Jesus gives and the way that Jesus moves.

Quit trying to be repentant enough or faithful enough. Let me be faithful to you. Experience that. Dive headlong, I dare you. Dive headlong, let go of your agenda. Dive headlong into the realities of Christ's faithfulness to you.

And see what happens to your own heart.

See how that would change you.

Surrender, pry your fingers from out of, see how that would transform your life.

It will create repentance.

We don't come to Jesus because we're repentant. We go to Jesus and we become repentant. We don't become thankful and then go

to Jesus in thanksgiving. We meet Jesus and then we become thankful.

Today we do all those things first. It's like saying I'm gonna get clean before I get in the shower. It doesn't work that way.

And now when you sit on the bar stool of your faith, you're not singing for your supper anymore.

What we do in those moments is that we sing because we've been fed.

We've been fed with good things.

You're not trying to get people to love you. You're singing because you're loved.

And I promise you in this place

is a place of freedom and it is a place of grace.

Amen, amen.