

Luke 17:1-10
A Lesson in Humility

We don't often like to think of it, but it is one of the great truths of our faith that God hates. For example, Scripture teaches us that God hates sinners,

“⁴For You are not a God who takes pleasure in wickedness;
No evil dwells with You.
⁵The boastful shall not stand before Your eyes;
You hate all who do iniquity” (Psalm 5:4-5).

God also hates false religion,

“You shall not behave thus toward the Lord your God, for every abominable act which the Lord hates they have done for their gods; for they even burn their sons and daughters in the fire to their gods” (Deuteronomy 12:31).

“⁴Yet I sent you all My servants the prophets, again and again, saying, ‘Oh, do not do this abominable thing which I hate.’ ⁵But they did not listen or incline their ears to turn from their wickedness, so as not to burn sacrifices to other gods” (Jeremiah 44:4-5).

But perhaps it could be argued, that since it lies at the core of all sin, God hates pride more than anything else,

“Everyone who is proud in heart is an abomination to the Lord;
Assuredly, he will not be unpunished” (Proverbs 16:5).

This is why Scripture warns us so strongly against pride, ‘for through the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think . . . do not be haughty in mind, but associate with the lowly. Do not be wise in your own estimation’ (Romans 12:3, 16). The injunction against this sin of pride is necessary because pride makes us arrogant and causes us to be tempted to reject God,

“The wicked, in the haughtiness of his countenance, does not seek Him.
All his thoughts are, ‘there is no God’” (Psalm 10:4).

Pride brings dishonor, “when pride comes, then comes dishonor, but with the humble is wisdom” (Proverbs 11:2). Pride also causes dissension, “an arrogant man stirs up strife, but he who trusts in the Lord will prosper” (Proverbs 28:25). And, it inevitably brings destruction, “pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before stumbling” (Proverbs 16:18).

In this passage, Luke is recounting the final months of the life of Jesus. As He made His way toward Jerusalem, He changed His approach from one that proclaimed the kingdom of God to the masses to particularly focusing on two groups - His disciples and the Pharisees. He continually tried to teach and disciple the first group and regularly confronted, or was confronted by, the latter. In this instance, Jesus was speaking to His disciples, but He was addressing the arrogance of the Pharisees. He began with a warning and ended with a parable. He spoke against pride by providing characteristics of humility. The Pharisees were known for their pride,. After all, “⁶they love the place of honor at banquets and the chief seats in the synagogues, ⁷and respectful greetings in the market places, and being called Rabbi by

men” (Matthew 23:6-7). Because of their high opinion of themselves, they refused to associate with those they believed were beneath them, “the Pharisees and their scribes began grumbling at His disciples, saying, ‘why do you eat and drink with the tax collectors and sinners?’” (Luke 5:30). Perhaps most destructive of all, they believed themselves righteous, “you are those who justify yourselves in the sight of men” (Luke 16:15). This despite the fact that, as experts in the Law of God, they should have known better.

Self-Restraint

This passage may seem disconnected, but Luke had promised an orderly account (Luke 1:3). To put the passage into context, in recent accounts Luke recorded Jesus confronting the Pharisees had been treating badly those sinners and tax collectors who associated with Jesus. Then Jesus told a story about a rich man had treated a poor beggar badly as well. Now Jesus warned His disciples not to do the same, and His warning was stern.

Jesus began, “it is inevitable that stumbling blocks come” (v.1). This must have seemed rather obvious to His frequently unfaithful disciples. We, too, all know that temptations are inevitable, “no temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man” (1 Corinthian 10:13). The word used for inevitable, *anendektos*, is unique to the Luke. It is actually a double-negative. That is, it means something like “it is impossible that temptations not come.” Stumbling blocks, *skandalon*, actually translates a term that means bait in a trap. This is, I think, a very accurate description of temptation.

Temptations are all too common, but we need not be the cause of them. “Woe to him through whom they come” Jesus said (v. 1). There are many ways people can tempt others to sin. Of course those who persecute believers or actively discourage or prevent others from serving the kingdom of God are stumbling blocks, but Jesus was talking to His disciples, and that certainly wouldn't characterize any of them (Judas Iscariot excepted). What Jesus was referring to was when professing Christians disparaged the name of Christ by the lack of correlation between their behavior and their profession of faith.

Sometimes we do this inadvertently, “fathers, do not provoke your children to anger” (Ephesians 6:4). Sometimes we do this by thinking only of ourselves, “¹³therefore let us not judge one another anymore, but rather determine this - not to put an obstacle or a stumbling block in a brother's way. ¹⁴I know and am convinced in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself; but to him who thinks anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean. ¹⁵For if because of food your brother is hurt, you are no longer walking according to love. Do not destroy with your food him for whom Christ died” (Romans 13:13-15). Sometimes we can cause others to stumble by not doing what we should do, “let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds” (Hebrews 10:24).

Jesus prescribed a very gruesome punishment for those who caused others to stumble, “it would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck and he were thrown into the sea, than that he would cause one of these little ones to stumble” (v. 2). The millstone of which Jesus spoke was the upper stone of the two between which grain was crushed. It was not the common hand mill, but rather a stone so large a draft animal, such as a donkey or ox, would be required to turn it. Grain was poured in through a hole in the center of the stone, and that, presumably was how it could be hung around someone's neck.

The word Luke used for “little ones” referred not to youth as much as it did to immaturity. That is, Jesus was talking not of young people, but rather people young in their faith. And, of course, the punishment was not meant to be literal but figurative. But as David learned, that did not make it any less painful. After his sin with Bathsheba, Nathan confronted David and told him “because by this deed you have given occasion to the enemies of the Lord to blaspheme, the child also that is born to you shall surely die” (2 Samuel 12:14). To any felling parent, having a child die would be as painful as anything imaginable.

Christians, too often, make Christianity unlovely in the eyes of the world. Unbelievers may know precious little about our doctrines, but they are very alert to our behavior. And, naturally, people are more convinced by what they see than by what they hear. We know that the cross of Christ will always be offensive. That is not unexpected. But let us not compound the offense by our inconsistent behavior. The best way I know of to do this is by remaining humble. Humility requires us to have the self-restraint to put our own agenda and desires aside for the benefit of others. Yes we have liberty, but it was never intended to be used in a way that caused others to stumble.

Willingness to Forgive

Jesus was serious. I imagine He was not smiling or casual in His tone. “Be on your guard” (v.3) He insisted. The phrase could be translated either “be constantly watching yourselves” or “constantly be looking out of one another” and both work equally well with the point Jesus was making. This was not something to be taken lightly.

“³If your brother sins, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. ⁴And if he sins against you seven times a day, and returns to you seven times, saying, ‘I repent,’ forgive him” (v. 3-4). It makes sense that if it was wrong for His disciples to tempt others into sin, it would be equally wrong to not forgive those who sinned against them. Humility also requires that we not take offense.

Jesus commanded His disciples to rebuke one another when sin was discovered. The protocol for doing so was described by Jesus as well,

“¹⁵If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother. ¹⁶But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed. ¹⁷If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector” (Matthew 18:15-17).

While some believers look forward too much to applying this passage, we must never forget the goal of rebuking someone in sin. Our objective is to provide the opportunity for our brother/sister to return to a right relationship with God. That is why the process is gradual - to allow time for the Holy Spirit to work His power of conviction in the heart of the sinner. First confrontation is private and personal, then with the help of one or two others. Only then is the sin made public to the church as a whole. If after all that, repentance is not forthcoming and the person persists in their sin, they are to be removed from fellowship.

But what if a person sins against us personally and does not ask for our forgiveness. Are we still obligated to forgive them, even though they have shown no signs of repentance? Scripture teaches that in some cases the answer is yes. Paul wrote the churches in Galatia “brethren, even if anyone is caught in

any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; each one looking to yourself, so that you too will not be tempted” (Galatians 6:1). No mention is made of repentance, or of forgiveness being requested. The key element here is the word ‘caught’ which refers to a sin in which someone falls into without premeditation. In such a case, forgiveness is to be given unconditionally.

This was mirrored by a previous teaching of Jesus, “and forgive us our sins, for we ourselves also forgive everyone who is indebted to us. And lead us not into temptation.” (Luke 11:4). We know that “love covers a multitude of sins” (1 Peter 4:8) and that love “does not take into account a wrong suffered” (1 Corinthians 13:5).

But there are some sins for which repentance must be seen before forgiveness is offered. These are habitual patterns of sin in the life of a believer. This is where the process of Matthew 18 is invoked. But still, we must understand that if forgiveness is genuinely requested, we must forgive. If the person then returns to their sin, and again is convicted and repents, we must forgive again. And so one, and so on. Jesus taught that there were no biblical boundaries for forgiveness when it is genuinely requested. This was in opposition to the then current teaching of the the Pharisees that forgiveness was to be offered only three times. They came to this conclusion by misreading Amos 1.

The reason why a believer ought to forgive in this instance is so that they, themselves will not be tempted to sin, as we see in Galatians 6:1. There are many other reasons why we know this to be true. First, forgiveness is one of the ways in which we can most emulate God, “⁶then the Lord passed by in front of him and proclaimed, ‘the Lord, the Lord God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth; ⁷who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin’” (Exodus 34:6-7). Also, we need to remember that whoever has sinned against us has sinned against God all the more. After committing adultery with Bathsheba, and murdering her husband, David still wrote, “against You, You only, I have sinned, and done what is evil in Your sight” (Psalm 51:4).

Furthermore, we can appreciate that if we have been forgiven our sins against a perfectly holy and just God, we are very hard-hearted not to forgive those who commit trifles against us. Our debt was so much greater, our debt was beyond our means to repay, and yet we were forgiven. A person who cannot forgive the small offenses others commit against him understands very little of the grace and mercy of a forgiving Heavenly Father. Surely we cannot withhold forgiveness from another. Also, if we refuse forgiveness, we will forfeit the love and fellowship of other believers. Our reputation for faultfinding and mean-spiritedness will be a barrier to true fellowship within the body of Christ.

In addition, if we do not forgive others, God will be compelled to deal with us harshly. In a parable about an unforgiving slave Jesus taught “³⁴and his lord, moved with anger, handed him over to the torturers until he should repay all that was owed him. ³⁵My heavenly Father will also do the same to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart” (Matthew 18:34-35). And Jesus taught that if we do not forgive others, we will not be forgiven, “¹⁴for if you forgive others for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. ¹⁵But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions” (Matthew 6:14-15).

It seems best to view sins against us as trials and remember that God allows difficulties to come our way for our benefit, “²consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, ³knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. ⁴And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.” (James 1:2-4).

How wonderful it would be if we viewed every wrong act against us as a blessing from God! But our pride and self-righteousness get in the way. They are the main causes of our willingness to be easily offended. We simply cannot make quarrels out of any misspoken word or misunderstood act. We should never take credit or offense. We don’t deserve the first and have no right to the latter. We should always try to put the actions of others in the best light. We cannot judge others by their actions and ourselves by our motives.

Obviously, to not cause others to stumble and to always forgive those who offend us requires a strength we do not possess. Hence the need for more faith.

Reliance upon God

Hearing the words of Jesus, not surprisingly, “the apostles said to the Lord, ‘increase our faith!’” (v. 5). In this case, it is clear from the wording that their plea was genuine and passionate. They wanted Jesus not to give them faith, for they had that, but rather to supplement or augment the faith they had. They had faith, but it seemed inadequate to the task. In their humility the apostles realized, as Paul did, “who is adequate for these things?” (2 Corinthians 2:16).

We know there are degrees of faith. There is weak faith and strong faith. Some have great faith, others little faith. Faith is not like justification. All believers are equally justified before God. No one is forgiven more than another. Every sin of every person called by God has been forgiven. But it is not so with faith. Faith varies in degrees among believers.

Jesus responded to their request with an illustration, “if you had faith like a mustard seed, you would say to this mulberry tree, ‘be uprooted and be planted in the sea’; and it would obey you” (v. 6). Again, Jesus was not being literal (remember He has been telling a series of parables), rather He was choosing an extreme example. Luke had recorded a previous parable of Jesus about mustard seeds and birds of the air. In that case the smallest of the know seeds produced a plant large enough for birds to nest in. In this case, Jesus used the mulberry tree, a tree with a vast and powerful root system. Yet, it could be uprooted and tossed into the ocean. How? By faith. Jesus was telling His disciples that God will supply them with the ability to obey His will. What they cannot do in their own power was to be done through God’s. Humble people rely upon that truth.

To not cause others to stumble and to constantly be willing to forgive are great works done by faith. But with what attitude are they to be performed? That was the point of the parable Jesus told.

Self-awareness

Jesus concluded with a parable,

“⁷Which of you, having a slave plowing or tending sheep, will say to him when he has come in from the field, ‘come immediately and sit down to eat’? ⁸But will he not say to him, ‘prepare something for me to eat, and properly clothe yourself and serve me while I eat and drink; and afterward you may eat

and drink'? ⁹He does not thank the slave because he did the things which were commanded, does he?
¹⁰So you too, when you do all the things which are commanded you, say, 'we are unworthy slaves; we have done only that which we ought to have done' (v. 7-10).

This parable raises two concerns among commentators. First, does Jesus contradict Himself when he said that no master would serve his servant, when in a previous parable He promised to do that very same thing, "blessed are those slaves whom the master will find on the alert when he comes; truly I say to you, that he will gird himself to serve, and have them recline at the table, and will come up and wait on them" (Luke 12:37)? Second, why would a servant who has done precisely what he was supposed to do be considered unprofitable?

A close reading of the story, however, addresses these issues. We are dealing with the owner of a small estate. He has, quite probably, only the one servant. This can be inferred by the fact that Jesus was addressing His disciples and asking them "which among you?" None of the disciples was rich, though Peter or John may have had a servant to help them with the fishing business.

The servant was pictured as doing his duty. He had been out in the field plowing the soil or tending the flocks. When he returned, hot and tired, he was ordered to prepare the meal and wait upon his master. Only when the master had thoroughly satisfied himself, was the weary servant allowed to get a drink and some food and, finally, some rest. It seemed that he was not even thanked for his efforts.

The point of the parable is that such is the kingdom of God. After all, what right did the servant have to his master's food and drink? What right did he have to thanks? The servant deserved nothing. So we, too, deserve nothing, but ought to serve our master with a glad heart, thankful for what He has done for us. That is when the promise of Luke 12:37 applies. The temptation Jesus was addressing in this parable was that the disciples, having been given the faith to not cause others to stumble and also graciously forgive others every sin against themselves, would become arrogant.

It makes sense. We all think more highly of ourselves, our character, our achievements, than we should. We may not say so, but we think so. We are very capable of seeing self-righteousness in others, but very unlikely to see it in ourselves. We must remember that we must renounce our own righteousness to receive the righteousness of God. Even when we do our best, we do so only by the grace of God.

Takeaways

May God give us the grace to humble ourselves, not that we may receive the praise of men, but that we might further the kingdom of God. Let us practice this by our self-restraint, willingness to forgive, reliance upon God, and awareness of who we are as servants of the King.