

Luke 17:1-10
March 2nd and 9th, 2020

Open with Prayer

HOOK:

Q: What are ways a person can become a stumbling block and lead young Christians astray? [Let people engage]

Transition: Last week we read about Jesus warning the Pharisees about the sin of loving money (Luke 16:14–31). This week, Jesus turns to His disciples to teach them about the essentials of the Christian life. The first essential of the Christian life is forgiveness. Jesus warns them about possible sins in their lives, because stumbling is an unfortunate part of life. It's no secret that we are all sinners living in a sinful world. But we must be careful not to cause others to stumble, for it is a serious thing to sin against a believer, especially a younger or immature Christian, and tempt him or her to sin. Let's read the text to begin.

BOOK:

Sin, Faith, Duty

17 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.’”

Process Observations/Questions:

Q: What did you most like about this passage? What resonated with you? [Let people engage]

Q: What did you least like about this passage? [Let people engage]

Q: What did you find in this passage that you didn't understand? [Let people engage]

Q: What do we learn about Jesus in this passage? [Let people engage]

LOOK:

How can we have such faith and offer such forgiveness? We must live in humility, knowing our place in the stream of life. God is master and we are slaves. We should not look upon a life of ongoing forgiveness as a great accomplishment. We should see it as the normal act of the life of faith. Forgiveness is what Jesus expects of us.

Close in Prayer

Commentaries for Today's Lesson:

Wiersbe, W. W. (1996). *The Bible Exposition Commentary (Vol. 1, pp. 243-244)*. Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

As Jesus made His way to Jerusalem, He continued to teach His disciples and prepare them for what He would suffer there. But He was also preparing them for the time when He would no longer be with them and they would be ministering to others in His place. It was a critical period in their lives.

In this chapter, Luke recorded lessons that Jesus gave His disciples about some of the essentials of the Christian life: forgiveness (Luke 17:1–6), faithfulness (Luke 17:7–10), thankfulness (Luke 17:11–19), and preparedness (Luke 17:20–37).

Forgiveness (Luke 17:1–6)

After Jesus warned the Pharisees about the sin of loving money (Luke 16:14–31), He then turned to His disciples to warn them about possible sins in their lives, for occasions to stumble (“offenses”) are an unfortunate part of life. After all, we are all sinners living in a sinful world. But we must take heed not to cause others to stumble, for it is a serious thing to sin against a fellow believer and tempt him or her to sin (Rom. 14:13; 1 Cor. 10:32; 1 John 2:10).

By “these little ones” (Luke 17:2), Jesus was referring not only to children but also to young believers who were learning how to follow the Lord (Matt. 18:1–6; Luke 10:21). Since Luke 17:1–10 is part of a context that begins with Luke 15:1, “little ones” would include the publicans and sinners who had come to believe in Jesus Christ. The Pharisees had criticized Jesus, and this might well have caused these new believers to stumble. So serious is this sin that a person would be better off cast alive into the sea, never to be seen again, than to deliberately cause others to stumble and sin.

But suppose *you* are not the one who does the sinning. Suppose another believer sins against you. Jesus anticipated this question in Luke 17:3–4 and instructed us what to do. First, we must have a personal concern for each other and obey His warning, “Take heed to yourselves.” This means that we should lovingly watch over each other and do all we can to keep one another from sinning.

If a brother or sister does sin against us, we should give a private loving rebuke. Our tendency might be to feel hurt down inside, nurse a grudge, and then tell others what happened to us, but this is the wrong approach (see Matt. 18:15–20). “Speaking the truth in love” (Eph. 4:15) is the first step toward solving personal differences.

Our aim is not to embarrass or hurt the offender, but to encourage him or her to repent (Gal. 6:1). If the offender does repent, then we must forgive (Eph. 4:32; and see Matt. 5:43–48). In fact, we must be *in the habit of forgiving*, for others might sin against us seven times a day—or even seventy times seven! (Matt. 18:21ff) No one is likely to commit that much sin in one day, but this use of hyperbole emphasized the point Jesus was making: do not enumerate the sins of others, for love “keeps no record of wrongs” (1 Cor. 13:4–6). We should always be ready to forgive others, for one day we may want them to forgive us!

We might have expected the disciples to respond with the prayer, “Increase our love!” Certainly love is a key element in forgiveness, but faith is even more important. *It takes living faith to obey these instructions and forgive others.* Our obedience in forgiving others shows that we are trusting God to take care of the consequences, handle the possible misunderstandings, and work everything out for our good and His glory.

Mature Christians understand that forgiveness is not a cheap exchange of words, the way squabbling children often flippantly say “I’m sorry” to each other. True forgiveness always involves pain; somebody has been hurt and there is a price to pay in healing the wound. Love *motivates* us to forgive, but faith *activates* that forgiveness so that God can use it to work blessings in the lives of His people.

Our Lord’s image of the mustard seed conveys the idea of life and growth. The mustard seed is very small, but it has life in it and, therefore, it can grow and produce fruit (Mark 4:30–32). If our faith is a *living* faith (James 2:14–26), it will grow and enable us to obey God’s commands. “Commit thy way unto the Lord; trust also in Him; and He shall bring it to pass” (Ps. 37:5). Forgiveness is a test of both our faith and our love.

Human nature being what it is, there will always be offenses that can easily become opportunities for sin. God’s people must get into the habit of facing these offenses honestly and lovingly and forgiving others when they repent. The Anglican pastor and poet George Herbert wrote, “He who cannot forgive breaks the bridge over which he himself must pass.”

Faithfulness (Luke 17:7–10)

The introductory word *but* indicates that Jesus was now going to balance one lesson with another. There was a danger that the Twelve might get so carried away with transplanting trees that they would ignore the everyday responsibilities of life! Faith that does not result in faithfulness will not accomplish God’s work. It is good to have faith to do the *difficult* (Luke 17:1–3) and the *impossible* (Luke 17:4–6), but it is essential that we have faith to do even the *routine tasks* our Master has committed to us. Privileges must always be balanced with responsibilities.

The servant in the story was evidently a “jack-of-all-trades,” for he was responsible for farming, shepherding, and cooking. It was not unusual for people with only modest means to hire at least one servant, but Jesus described a situation which in that day was unthinkable: a master ministering to his servant! In fact, He introduced the story with a phrase that means, “Can any of you imagine?” ... Their answer had to be, “No, we cannot imagine such a thing!”

Jesus had already discussed His relationship to His servants *and had promised to serve them if they were faithful* (Luke 12:35–38). He Himself was among them as a servant (Luke 22:27), even though He was Master of all. This story emphasizes faithfulness to duty no matter what the demands might be, and the argument is from the lesser to the greater. If a common servant is faithful to obey the orders of his master who does not reward (thank) him, how much more ought Christ’s disciples obey their loving Master, who has promised to reward them graciously!

A faithful servant should not expect any special reward, since he did only what he was told to do. The word translated “unprofitable” means “without need”—that is, “nobody owes us anything.” The servant was indeed profitable; after all, he cared for his master’s fields, flocks, and food. The statement means, “My master does not owe me anything extra.” *The fact that Jesus will reward His servants is wholly a matter of God’s grace.* We do not deserve anything because we have obeyed Him and served Him.

As His servants, we must beware lest we have the wrong attitude toward our duties. There are two extremes to avoid: merely doing our duty in a slavish way *because we have to*, or doing our duty *because we hope to gain a reward*. Christian industrialist R.G. LeTourneau used to say, “If you give because it pays, *it won’t pay.*” This principle also applies to service. Both extremes are seen in the attitudes of the elder brother (Luke 15:25–32) who was miserably obedient, always hoping that his father would let him have a party with his friends.

What then is the proper attitude for Christian service? “Doing the will of God from the heart” (Eph. 6:6). “If you love Me, keep My commandments” (John 14:15). To the person who is born again, “His commandments are not grievous” (1 John 5:3). Serving Him is a delight, not just a duty, and we obey Him because we love Him. “I delight to do Thy will, O my God: yea, Thy law is within my heart” (Ps. 40:8).

Martin, J. A. (1985). Isaiah. In J. F. Walvoord & R. B. Zuck (Eds.), *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures* (Vol. 2, pp. 247-248)

f. *Jesus’ teaching about obligations toward men and God (17:1–10).*

17:1–4. **Jesus** taught about the obligations **His disciples** had toward other people (vv. 1–4) and God (vv. 6–10). Followers of Jesus are not to **cause people to sin**. In this life sin cannot be eradicated—such things **are bound to come**. **But** a disciple would be better off drowned by a **millstone** (a heavy stone for grinding grain) **tied around his neck, than** to bring spiritual harm (*skandalisē*, “to cause to sin”) to **these little ones** (people who, like little children, are helpless before God; cf. 10:21; Mark 10:24). Presumably the sinning referred to is lack of faith in the Messiah. Jesus had already noted that the Pharisees were not only refusing to enter the kingdom but were also keeping others from entering (Luke 11:52).

Not only are Jesus’ followers not to cause others to sin; they also are to counteract sin by forgiving others (17:3–4). One should **rebuke a brother** if he **sins**. **If he repents**, he is to be forgiven even if he **sins** and repents over and over. The words **seven times in a day** denote a completeness—as often as it happens.

17:5–10. Jesus also taught that His followers have responsibilities toward God. The first responsibility is to have faith. When the disciples asked Jesus for more **faith**, He answered that they needed not more faith but the right kind of faith. Even the smallest amount of faith (like a **mustard seed**, the smallest seed; cf. 13:19) could do amazingly miraculous things, such as uprooting a **mulberry tree**, a tree with deep roots (17:6).

The disciples’ second responsibility toward God was humble service (vv. 7–10). They should not expect special praise for doing things they were expected to do. **A servant** does not get special praise from his master for doing his job. Likewise, disciples have certain responsibilities which they are to fulfill in humility as God’s **unworthy** (*achreioi*, “good for nothing,” used elsewhere only in Matt. 25:30) **servants**.

Cabal, T., Brand, C. O., Clendenen, E. R., Copan, P., Moreland, J. P., & Powell, D. (2007). *The Apologetics Study Bible: Real Questions, Straight Answers, Stronger Faith* (pp. 1547-1548). Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers.

17:1–7 The sayings in this section have different settings in Mt and Mk and are somewhat differently expressed there, indicating that the version in Lk may have come from a unique source. Because of their proverbial character, they were probably used by Jesus numerous times in His ministry, and thus the tradition carried multiple versions of them. On faith, see note on Mk 11:22–24.

17:10 See note on 12:37. The focus is not on God’s attitude toward our obedience (as an ungrateful taskmaster) or on the character of discipleship as a cold, thankless endeavor, but on the humble attitude of the disciple, who recognizes that he or she is unworthy of honor for merely fulfilling a duty.

Barry, J. D., Mangum, D., Brown, D. R., Heiser, M. S., Custis, M., Ritzema, E., ... Bomar, D. (2012, 2016). Faithlife Study Bible (Lk 1:2-10). Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press.

17:2 millstone A large stone used to grind grain in a mill.

little ones Likely refers to new or immature believers (compare Matt 18:1–6).

17:3 forgive Forgiving someone who repents is not just an option; it is commanded by Jesus.

17:4 seven times Suggests the need for abundant forgiveness (compare Matt 18:21–22). Jesus advocates for forgiving as a response to divine forgiveness. See note on Luke 6:37.

17:6 a mustard seed A tiny seed that grows into a 10-foot-high shrub (see note on Matt 17:20).

mulberry tree The Greek word used here indicates a large tree that would be difficult to uproot. In a parallel saying from Matthew, Jesus refers to a mountain instead of a tree (Matt 17:20).

17:10 We are unworthy slaves Jesus encourages His disciples to conduct themselves as humble slaves to God, in contrast to the self-aggrandizing Pharisees (16:14–15).

Butler, T. C. (2000). Luke (Vol. 3, pp. 278–280). Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

A. Dedication to Christian Servanthood: Faith and Forgiveness (17:1–10)

SUPPORTING IDEA: *Dedication to Christ means living as a servant by doing one's duty to God and in faith forgiving, not tempting, a neighbor.*

17:1–2. Jesus informed his disciples of the radical nature of following him. It was a path that led to Jerusalem and the cross. Taking this path is not a life of pious isolation. It remains a path through this world interacting with other people. Such interaction begins with a strong understanding about the nature of people. One does not divide people into two camps—(1) the ritually clean, pious, obedient Pharisees and (2) everyone else, those who are sinners. All people are the same. Everyone sins and stands guilty before God (see Rom. 3:23; 6:23). This means all people face temptations and succumb.

Jesus turned to the strong language of grief and mourning to express his woe upon anyone who is an agent of temptation, who causes someone else to sin. The agent of temptation and sin would be better off committing suicide. That would be the result of the ironic and grotesque picture of placing your head through a millstone so that you wore it like a necklace. The stone would make you sink into the ocean, no matter how well you could swim. The emphasis in Luke's writings on caring for the underprivileged, the crippled, the blind, the widow, and the poor continues in this passage. It is these "little ones" in life on whom we have influence and who will follow our lead in sinning. The "big ones" or "great ones," by contrast, would be Pharisees and scribes who would not follow our leadership anyway and would not recognize themselves as sinners.

17:3–4. Be careful. Watch out, Jesus declared. Exercise your responsibility to these "little ones" in society. Protect them. This involves more than refraining from tempting them to sin. It also means confronting them when they do sin in an attempt to bring them to repentance and

God's forgiveness (cf. 1 John 5:16). If the little brother does repent, then you have an added responsibility. You must forgive just as God forgives, for this is the essence of your prayer life (11:4). Do not keep score. You may have to forgive beyond your tolerance level. Just think how much God has to forgive you for. Even if the brother sins against you a ridiculous number of times in one day, forgive him. Keep on forgiving. Do not stop to test the genuineness of the other person's request. Just forgive. Thus, you help the other person to grow and do not tempt him to sin.

17:5. The disciples caught a glimpse of the price Christ was asking them to pay. No one is that patient with another person. Normal human aptitudes and abilities cannot fulfill such a command. Total *faith* in God and total dedication to God's way of life are required. Thus, *the disciples asked for an added supply of faith to live in such an abnormal way—abnormal at least from a human perspective. They did not think they could supply such faith themselves.* They knew Jesus was the source of all faith.

17:6. *Jesus did not grant their request. Rather, he told them to exercise the faith they had. The smallest imaginable amount of faith, just as much as a tiny seed that you can barely see, is enough to accomplish unimaginable miracles.* Who could think of speaking to an old, gnarled tree and making it jump out of the ground? Add to that asking it to jump into the sea and start growing there. No one would attempt such a feat. Yet, the smallest amount of faith can accomplish such a miracle.

What does this mean? Should God's people talk to trees and play miraculous tricks with them? Of course not! This is a call to seasoned disciples—people who have matured in Christ—to realize the potential of their relationship with Jesus. It is a call to dependent, expectant faith. The key term is faith. We must know who God is and trust him to do the kind of things he does in the way he does them. We must live within his will and ask for his will to be done. Then we can see marvelous things happen among his people in his world.

We do not need more faith. We need to see the faith that is already in us and exercise it. We need to understand the very nature of faith itself. It is not something we place in a deposit account until it grows sufficiently to do what we want done. Faith is an acknowledgment that no matter how long we wait, we will never be able to do anything on our own, but the moment we call on God, he can do anything.

17:7–9. Picture yourself as a landowner who employs slaves, Jesus told them. You send one of your slaves into the field to plow or into the hillside to tend the sheep. What would you do when the slave returned from doing his work for the day? Would you rush to him and invite him to sit down and eat a wonderful meal you had provided? Of course not! You would sit at the table and wait for the slave to go to the kitchen, prepare your meal, and bring your food. Only when this part of his daily work was done could the slave expect to eat something himself. Or would you rush out to the slave coming from the field and say, "Oh, thank you for working in the field today. That is so wonderful of you." You would never even think about acting in such a manner.

17:10. Finally, Jesus drove the point home to his disciples. You have gone out on mission for me, he told them. You have preached and healed and exorcised. You follow me each day surrendering normal home life. You have done much, but remember that what you have done is simply what God expects you to do. Do not expect to get some great prize for what you do in faith. Realize God is actually the one at work, doing what you prayed for. So having done all you know to do, simply sit down and say to God, We are worthless slaves. All we have done is the

task assigned us to do. Faith is accepting the role of an obedient servant without expecting great gratitude and reward. Faith trusts Jesus and so follows Jesus.

In summary, verses 1–10 depict the life of mature faith in Jesus. It is a life of forgiveness, faith, and humility. Forgiveness is unlimited. Nothing should prevent a disciple from forgiving. The true disciple realizes how difficult this is for humans, so the request is made for more faith.

Jesus rejected such a request. Increased faith is not the answer. Faith is not something measured and compared to see who wins the faith championship. Faith is either true or false. The smallest amount of faith can do the impossible. Forgiving is not the impossible; it is the normal act of faith. Jesus' followers, trusting him in faith and seeking to do the Father's will, naturally forgive people without keeping score.

How can we have such faith and offer such forgiveness? We must live in humility, knowing our place in the stream of life. God is master and we are slaves. We should not look upon a life of ongoing forgiveness as a great accomplishment. We should see it as the normal act of the life of faith. Forgiveness is what Jesus expects of us. As his slaves, we do what he expects. If we refuse to forgive or think we cannot forgive, we have the wrong opinion of ourselves. We think we are something greater and better than a servant. Do not ask for increased faith, Jesus said. Ask for the true faith that makes you a slave of Jesus who normally practices forgiveness as a faithful way of life.

The Holy Bible: New International Version. (1984). (Lk 17:1-10). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

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