

October 20, 2019
Sunday Morning Service
Series: Luke
Community Baptist Church
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Greer, SC 29650
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INCREASING FAITH IS NECESSARY

Luke 17:1-10

The story is told of John Wesley's voyage with General George Oglethorpe to Georgia. Along the way, one of Oglethorpe's servants offended him and the general threatened him with the words, "I will never forgive you." Immediately, Wesley said to the general, "Then sir, I hope you never sin."

Forgiveness is to many people the ultimate humility. To forgive is to lose control. In their minds, to forgive is to give up a position of superiority or power that they think they wield over those who have hurt them, sinned against them, or abused them in some way. That conclusion is a lie of Satan that our prideful flesh quickly embraces. As a result, there are many miserable people who actually hate themselves and yet appear to be unable to figure out why they have this self-loathing.

Someone wrote, "He that cannot forgive others breaks down the bridge over which he must pass himself; for every one has need to be forgiven. As when the seaworm makes a hole in the shell of the mussel, the hole is filled up with a pearl; so, when the heart is pierced by an injury, forgiveness is like a pearl, healing and filling up the wound."

Our Savior knows the healing we all need and He knows how that healing is achieved. Our enemy, Satan, does not want us to be happy and satisfied in our fellowship with Christ and others of Christ's followers. Therefore, he deceives us into thinking that the humility that is necessary for forgiveness is weakness, a bad thing, an attitude that must be ignored or abandoned.

Who experienced more humility than Jesus, who "*had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should*

desire him." Who "*was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not.*" The perfect Man who "*has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted.*" Who suffered more than He who "*was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed*" (Isaiah 53:2-5)?

How did He endure? How could Jesus hang on the cross, being tortured to death **by** foolish sinners, **for** foolish sinners and cry out, "*Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do*" (Luke 23:34)? Peter, who witnessed the whole spectacle, wrote under inspiration from the Holy Spirit, "*When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly*" (1 Peter 2:23).

Humility to forgive is found only in full and complete faith in God. We have all been victimized by sin. No one here has escaped the hurt, the pain, the offense of careless people or wicked people. But God our Creator who knows what is best for us requires us to forgive those who hurt us. No wonder Jesus' followers said, "Increase our faith!"

Faith Regards Others (vv.1-3a).

Temptations will come in life, but woe to the one who tempts others (vv.1-2). Jesus stressed the danger in tempting others. *And he said to his disciples, "Temptations to sin are sure to come, but woe to the one through whom they come!"* (v.1). That temptations are certain is unarguable. Who knows that better than Jesus? He was tempted in every way we are tempted. The huge difference is that He never sinned. But for the rest of us, it is impossible to escape temptation. Everything about our world tempts us to sin through the lust of the flesh, lust of the eye, or pride. Even if you hid away in a cave, you still have to deal with your fallen nature that desires to sin. Yes, temptation is bound to happen, but Jesus warns you and me not to be the ones who make it happen! The word temptation in this verse is the Greek word *skandalon*, which generally means to cause to

stumble. Here it means to cause someone to fall spiritually, to fall into sin.

Because Jesus warns us not to be the ones who cause others to stumble, we need to stop to consider how we do that to others. We might force someone to stumble by causing them to lust by how we dress or act. Or we could cause someone to be envious or jealous by boasting. Or maybe we could cause someone to be discouraged by our criticism, slander, malice. It is possible to cause someone to quit serving Christ by our anger or wrath. And maybe we cause someone to gossip by our careless chatter. Or we can cause someone to renew addiction to alcohol by our selfish, careless use of beverages.

Jesus pronounced “woe” on the person who causes such stumbling. “Woe” is not good news. It is a warning to those who tempt. In fact, Jesus described the woe by saying it would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck and he were cast into the sea than that he should cause one of these little ones to sin (v.2). The danger is causing someone who is immature in faith to stumble into sin. People who are fairly new believers are not firmly grounded in their fellowship with the Lord or in their stability in the Word. They are Christ’s little ones. Some of them have a hard time learning that Christians also are prone to sin. Our carelessness can easily stunt the spiritual growth of young Christians.

This careless cause of stumbling is very serious. So serious is the matter that Jesus said it is better to literally die than be the cause of fellow Christians sinning. In fact, the description here is a gruesome death. Who would count temptation to sin that serious?

Several years ago when I was a younger pastor, I was asked to mediate a church squabble. I met with the parties involved. It didn’t take too long to discern that there was a whole lot of pride at stake on both sides. That typically is the case in church disagreements. After a couple hours of tense discussion, I closed the meeting in prayer. I prayed, “Lord, help every man at this table to realize that in your opinion, it is better for them to be killed than to cause their brothers and sisters to stumble in sin.” After I said amen, one of the more obviously proud fellows was quick to say, “Now hold on. It’s not right to pray a prayer like that.” Why not? That’s what Jesus said.

In order to keep us from the sin of tempting others to sin, Jesus told the disciples, and us, to pay attention. “*Pay attention to*

yourselves!” (v.3a) Jesus said. In the original setting Jesus addressed this warning to His followers. It is possible that Jesus also intended for hypocritical Pharisees to hear the warning. But primarily this is instruction for those who will take up Jesus’ ministry and represent Him.

The call to pay attention requires the opposite of being careless or ignorant. It is a command to wake up, take heed, watch what is happening. It is a present tense command that requires ongoing practice. It is a command for us to pay attention to ourselves. Okay, what area or what about ourselves should we guard?

This warning addresses many areas of life. In another statement, Jesus cautioned us to pay attention to our faith and doctrine. *And he cautioned them, saying, “Watch out; beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod” (Mark 8:15).* In the same way, we must be careful regarding our lifestyle. “*But watch yourselves lest your hearts be weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and cares of this life, and that day come upon you suddenly like a trap” (Luke 21:34).* Or as Paul warned regarding our ministry for Christ’s glory, *According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building upon it. Let each one take care how he builds upon it (1 Corinthians 3:10).* We need to pay attention not to cause others to stumble into sin because of our Christian liberties. *But take care that this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak (1 Corinthians 8:9).* Even our self-confidence can tempt us to stumble ourselves. *Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall (1 Corinthians 10:12).* In an all-inclusive statement, Paul warned Pastor Timothy to pay close attention to himself. *Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers (1 Timothy 4:16).*

There are so many different ways, different areas of life in which we can cause others to sin. There really is not a time when we can safely let down our guard. The Christian’s walk is very much like Bunyan’s Christian walking through Vanity Fair with Mr. Faithful. They carefully looked around them all the time because their whole environment was in conflict with the character of their God and Savior. We must especially keep an eye on our actions, attitudes,

habits, and motivations. Do not be afraid to call yourself into question.

Temptations come. Stumbling into sin often results. How do we respond? What should we do? Jesus also gave instruction about the right response to stumbling.

Faith Forgives (vv.3b-5).

Forgiving offenders is not an option for Christians (vv.3b-4). Jesus gave very clear instruction about how the process is to work. *“If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him”* (v.3b). On the one hand, temptation is bound to happen. We just need to be sure that we are not the one who causes it. Also, because temptation comes, your brother is going to sin. But notice that the resultant command is “You forgive him.” This implies that he or she sins against you.

Because temptation happens, sin (offense) is going to happen. This means that at some point you are going to be hurt, wounded, saddened by the actions and attitudes of others. Or more precisely according to the context, someone is going to cause you to stumble into sin (maybe discouragement or fear or anger). When that happens, the Lord requires both parties to interact. Proper interaction seldom happens. But there is no other option in order to do God’s will. Therefore, we sadly conclude that many, if not the majority of Christians, are out of God’s will. Clamming up, walking away, playing the passive aggressive game is not the answer. Sadly, that is exactly how most people, including Christians, respond to offense.

The planned response according to Scripture is that when a brother sins, tell him, point out the offense. The desired result will be that, hearing the fault, the brother or sister will agree, admit the problem, forsake the problem and ask for forgiveness.

Here is the picture. A brother sins against you. In doing so, he placed a burden on your back. You can carry the burden or give it back. When you go to the person and identify the burden, it is as though you placed it on the table. When you place it on the table, that is the final conclusion in your heart that when there is confession, repentance, and a request for forgiveness, it is already a done deal. You give the burden back to its owner and you never pick it up again.

Too often the burden remains on the table because the offender does not acknowledge his offense or the offended person refuses to take it from her back. Too often the offended person likes to hold a grudge because that feels like control.

Okay, forgiveness is the plan even though it is not oft coming. But more unusual than the Lord’s desired response is the extent of forgiveness we must give. Jesus went on to teach, *“And if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, saying, ‘I repent,’ you must forgive him”* (v.4). That seems pretty incredible. Probably the legalist hears this command and responds determined to keep track and at seven “forgiveness” concludes that this is all that Jesus requires of him.

Conversely, the person with faith in the Lord will understand that this means frequently or even limitless. The extent is expressed even more vividly by Jesus’ answer to Peter’s question. *Then Peter came up and said to him, “Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?” Jesus said to him, “I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven”* (Matthew 18:21-22).

This is what unconditional love looks like. And when we think we have forgiven the same person too many times, stop to think how many times God has forgiven you – often for the same sin! The only qualification here is the offender’s voluntary confession of sin and repentance. No doubt someone is going to argue that repeating offenses seven times in one day does not look like genuine repentance. Genuineness is not the point – willingness to forgive is.

Forgiving the same person repeatedly is going to be very difficult. The lesson we need to learn is that real forgiveness, difficult or painful forgiveness, is rooted in faith in God. We forgive because we are forgiven. Paul taught us to *Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you* (Ephesians 4:32). This means that forgiveness really is not an option for the Christian. Because God has forgiven all our sins through Christ, we must also forgive all the sins people have committed against us.

Another expression of this required forgiveness is found when Jesus told the story about the horrible punishment given to the unforgiving servant. Jesus said, *“So also my heavenly Father will do*

to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart” (Matthew 18:35).

The lesson here is that a person who will not genuinely forgive repentant offenders proves by their failure to forgive that they are destined for eternal punishment, that is, they are unsaved. This is why people, even religious people, even professing Christians act like they cannot make the connection between Christ forgiving us and us forgiving each other. You can read the words of Jesus and words of Scripture to them and it never registers. All they know is that they want to carry a grudge. They are in a very precarious position regarding eternity.

In response to the Lord setting this very difficult standard, *The apostles said to the Lord, “Increase our faith!”* (v.5). The connection should be obvious. Forgiveness is difficult. The more deeply we have been hurt, the more difficult it is to let the burden go. That is why we need to pray along with the disciples, “Increase our faith.” Increased faith is necessary because it is only when we are depending wholly on God for life and happiness that we are able to understand why it is good to forgive, even in the difficult situations.

Faith Can Be Powerful (v.6).

Jesus addressed the challenge for increased faith to the very people who must have faith (v.6a). He stated the proposition as a possibility, *If you had faith . . .* In the setting of the text, the apostles were going to continue the work of telling the Good News of salvation. In that work, like had been the case for their Master, they were going to be slandered, mocked, and most of them killed—for doing good! And Jesus expected them to forgive their offenders just like He did. We, too, are Jesus’ messengers—we, too, will be sinned against—and we, too, need to forgive.

In tough circumstances like that, we need great faith, complete trust that God knows what is best for us. But the faith of Christ’s followers is going to be variable. *And the Lord said, “If you had faith like a grain of mustard seed”* (v.6a). We know that the mustard seed was the smallest of seeds. So Jesus is talking about very small, but real, genuine dependance on God. The point is not the amount of faith we have, but the object of our faith. Sometimes our faith is divided.

We do not wholly trust God. We forget that genuine faith leans completely on God, expecting help from no one else, knowing full well that I am helpless.

And what can the follower of Christ expect if he or she has even small but genuine faith? Jesus gave an illustration of the result. It is an amazing feat (v.6b). Jesus said, *“You could say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea,’ and it would obey you”* (v.6b). At least this time Jesus didn’t tell us we could move mountains (Mark 11:22-23). Yeah, but we can’t move mulberry trees by faith either! What did Jesus mean?

Jesus proposed a hypothetical feat. Notice the wording of the promise. *“You could say to this mulberry tree. . .”* (v.6b). Jesus did not promise supernatural power to do stuff that doesn’t matter. In reality, if you want to move the tree get a pick and shovel and ask God to give you strength as you get busy. The real point is that we need to depend on God to do what we cannot do—the impossible! Here is the case in point. We need to depend wholly on God to have the humility and grace to forgive the offender seven times in one day. In the same way, some of you need complete dependance on God to do the impossible of forgiving that person who abused you, lied to you, cheated you, hurt you, slandered you, robbed you, or whatever he or she did to you.

That you need to forgive is not debatable. That you can forgive through God’s grace is not debatable either.

Faith Serves Unnoticed (vv.7-10).

The last few verses of this section of the text seem to be disconnected from what went before. What is it? It is a short illustration about humble dependance. The kind of dependance on God we need in order to forgive.

In this short illustration (vv.7-9), Jesus reminded us that servants are not typically honored. Jesus asked, *“Will any one of you who has a servant plowing or keeping sheep say to him when he has come in from the field, ‘Come at once and recline at table?’”* (v.7). This is a story for people who think they deserve to be respected (like the Pharisees). It is true that God teaches that people are to be respected. But we know that doesn’t always happen. That is not the

point here. The point Jesus desires to teach is that despite our position or station in life, we who trust Christ are really slaves (*doulos*).

Thinking of ourselves in that position, we remember that the master never invites the slave to recline at table with him. Rather, servants, slaves simply do what is expected. What is expected is that they serve the master. “*Will he not rather say to him, ‘Prepare supper for me, and dress properly, and serve me while I eat and drink, and afterward you will eat and drink?’*” (v.8). Preparing the master’s meal is what slaves do. Serving Christ for Christ’s glory, not ours, is what we do.

And typically, when the slave has done all that is required, he receives little thanks for it. “*Does he thank the servant because he did what was commanded?*” (v.9). In the setting of the story the answer is, “No.” The amazing reality is that, for us slaves of Christ, we experience treatment more in keeping with sons.

But what does it all mean? What is the application of the illustration? What we should do? “*So you also, when you have done all that you were commanded*” (v.10a). We should strive to do all that Christ commands. That is to show that we love Him. That is to show to all that know our position as His servant. We are not in charge and should not expect honor on this earth.

How we should respond? We should say, “*We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty*” (v.10b). By nature we deserve the punishment of hell. Through grace, God has made us His servants. If serving Him costs us our life, that is our duty. The great news is that when we end this life and are with Christ in heaven, the slavery is over and we are rewarded more than we can imagine.

Because the world is sunk in sin, we are going to be tempted to sin. But let’s be sure we are not the tempters. And if someone causes us to sin, we need to be quick to forgive them, even if they do not care to be forgiven. It takes great faith for us to live humbly as we should. It takes great faith for us to know that God keeps the score and will make all things right in the end. The good news is that great faith comes from God and is focused on God who loves us.