

## The Serial Forgiver: The Life of Mercy

Luke 17:1-10; Coast Community Church; Pastor Earl Miles; April 7, 2019

### Serial Sinners

We've all heard of a 'serial killer' or 'serial adulterer.' What do we mean by that?

According to the Oxford dictionary, the adjective 'serial' means:

'Repeatedly committing the same offence and typically following a characteristic, predictable behaviour pattern (repeatedly following the same behavior pattern).

*'a serial killer'; 'he was a serial adulterer'; 'serial monogamy'*

Our text for this morning is meant to help us respond rightly to 'serial sinners.'

### The Text

<sup>1</sup> He said to His disciples, "It is inevitable that stumbling blocks come, but woe to him through whom they come!" <sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> Be on your guard! If your brother sins, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. <sup>4</sup> And if he sins against you seven times a day, and returns to you seven times, saying, 'I repent,' forgive him." <sup>5</sup> The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!" <sup>6</sup> And the Lord said, "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. <sup>7</sup> "Which 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'? <sup>8</sup> But 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'? <sup>9</sup> He does not thank the slave because he did the things which were commanded, does he? <sup>10</sup> So 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.'" – Luke 17:1-10

While most exegetes put verses 1 to 10 together, there are two ways to see them:

- One way is to view them as a unit of collected saying with no obvious or necessary connection.
- Another way is to view them as a unit with obvious and necessary connections.
- I think the latter is the best way to understand them and apply them.

**1. One of the greatest hindrances in life is a lack of mercy.**

‘Not long before she died in 1988, in a moment of surprising candor in television, Marghanita Laski, one of our best-known secular humanists and novelists, said, "What I envy most about you Christians is your forgiveness; I have nobody to forgive me." - John Stott in The Contemporary Christian.

- What is the most compelling thing about Christianity? Mercy!

<sup>1</sup> He said to His disciples, “It is inevitable that stumbling blocks come, but woe to him through whom they come! <sup>2</sup> 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. – Luke 17:1-2

- What is a ‘stumbling block’?

Someone who hinders another from trusting and loving as God commands.

You shall not curse a deaf man, nor place a **stumbling block** before the blind, but you shall revere your God; I am the Lord. – Leviticus 19:14

But He turned and said to Peter, “Get behind Me, Satan! You are a **stumbling block** to Me; for you are not setting your mind on God’s interests, but man’s.” – Matthew 16:23

Therefore 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. – Romans 14:13

What do I mean by ‘hindrance’? This is another way of saying ‘stumbling block’ as we see in verses 1 and 2 of Luke 17. A ‘stumbling block’ is the stick in a trap that triggers the trap so that the animal is caught. It is used figuratively for something or someone who ‘entraps someone’ in a wrong position and therefore, hinders them from trusting God and loving people. The ‘hindrance’ can be for others through our lives or a hindrance in our own lives.

- Why is the consequence so great for being a ‘stumbling block’?

Because it involves the worship of something other than God.

“Son of man, these men have set up their idols in their hearts and have put right before their faces the **stumbling block** of their iniquity. Should I be consulted by them at all? – Ezekiel 14:3

- Who is in view here?

Those who claim to be part of God’s people but are actually misleading God’s people (the Pharisees, for one).

- The ‘stumbling blocks’ are the Pharisees and all who do not know and show and proclaim the mercy of God in Christ (revealed in Moses and the Prophets).

He has shown you, O man, what *is* good; And what does the Lord require of you But to do justly, To love mercy, And to walk humbly with your God? – Micah 6:8 (NKJV)

<sup>36</sup> Then He left the crowds and went into the house. And His disciples came to Him and said, “Explain to us the parable of the tares of the field.” <sup>37</sup> And He said, “The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man, <sup>38</sup> and the field is the world; and *as for* the good seed, these are the sons of the kingdom; and the tares are the sons of the evil *one*; <sup>39</sup> and the enemy who sowed them is the devil, and the harvest is the end of the age; and the reapers are angels.

<sup>40</sup> So just as the tares are gathered up and burned with fire, so shall it be at the end of the age.

<sup>41</sup> The Son of Man will send forth His angels, and they will gather out of His kingdom all stumbling blocks, and those who commit lawlessness, <sup>42</sup> and will throw them into the furnace of fire; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. <sup>43</sup> Then THE RIGHTEOUS WILL SHINE FORTH AS THE SUN in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear. – Matthew 13:36-43

Jesus is addressing His disciples directly, but we know the Pharisees are listening (Luke 16:14) as well as a larger crowd (Luke 14:25). The ‘stumbling blocks’ or ‘hindrances’ most likely in view are the Pharisees and those like them who lack mercy to sinners. We see this reflected in their opposition to Jesus eating with tax-collectors and sinners (Luke 15:1-2), their being like the elder son who condemns the younger son and resents the father’s mercy to the younger son (Luke 15:28-30), their money-loving which is illustrated by the story of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:14, 19, 24), and Jesus’ rebuke of them in other contexts for not showing mercy and compassion (Matthew 9:13; 12:7).

- Does this have anything to do with the previous passages?

Yes, stumbling blocks will experience God’s judgment in hell.

<sup>41</sup> The Son of Man will send forth His angels, and they will gather out of His kingdom all stumbling blocks, and those who commit lawlessness, <sup>42</sup> and will throw them into the furnace of fire; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. <sup>43</sup> Then THE RIGHTEOUS WILL SHINE FORTH AS THE SUN in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear. – Matthew 13:41-43

Stumbling blocks in this context refer to those who embrace and send the wrong message regarding mercy.

- The ‘rich man’ did not receive mercy because he did not show mercy (to Lazarus). (James 2:13)

And he cried out and said, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus so that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool off my tongue, for I am in agony in this flame.’ – Luke 16:24

- The Bible is filled with calls to live a life of mercy:

“Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive **mercy**. – Matthew 5:7

But go and learn what this means: ‘I DESIRE **COMPASSION**, AND NOT SACRIFICE,’ for I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners.” - Matthew 9:13

But if you had known what this means, ‘I DESIRE **COMPASSION**, AND NOT A SACRIFICE,’ you would not have condemned the innocent. - Matthew 12:7

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier provisions of the law: justice and **mercy** and faithfulness; but these are the things you should have done without neglecting the others. – Matthew 23:23

And he said, “The one who showed **mercy** toward him.” Then Jesus said to him, “Go and do the same.” – Luke 10:37

For judgment *will be* merciless to one who has shown no **mercy**; **mercy** triumphs over judgment. – James 2:13

But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, reasonable, full of **mercy** and good fruits, unwavering, without hypocrisy. – James 3:17

The Bible speaks over and over of the crucial importance of being people who live a life of mercy to others. This ‘mercy’ involves a tender and caring response to both sin and suffering, which are often linked.

- The story of eating with the tax-collectors and sinners. (Matthew 9:9-13)

<sup>9</sup> As Jesus went on from there, He saw a man called Matthew, sitting in the tax collector’s booth; and He \*said to him, “Follow Me!” And he got up and followed Him. <sup>10</sup> Then it happened that as Jesus was reclining *at the table* in the house, behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and were dining with Jesus and His disciples. <sup>11</sup> When the Pharisees saw *this*, they said to His disciples, “Why is your Teacher eating with the tax collectors and sinners?” <sup>12</sup> But when Jesus heard *this*, He said, “*It is* not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick. <sup>13</sup> But go and learn what this means: ‘I DESIRE **COMPASSION**, AND NOT SACRIFICE,’ for I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners.” – Matthew 9:9-13

- Are you a merciful person?
- Is it your desire to live a life of mercy?

## 2. Loving like Jesus requires that I be a serial forgiver for serial sinners.

‘A Sunday School teacher had just concluded her lesson and wanted to make sure she had made her point. She said, "Can anyone tell me what you must do before you can obtain forgiveness of sin?" There was a short pause and then, from the back of the room, a small boy spoke up. "Sin," he said. - *Bits & Pieces*, May, 1991.

- If you want to live a life of mercy, what do you need? People to sin against you!

<sup>3</sup> Be on your guard! If your brother sins, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. <sup>4</sup> And if he sins against you seven times a day, and returns to you seven times, saying, ‘I repent,’ forgive him.” <sup>5</sup> The apostles said to the Lord, “Increase our faith!” <sup>6</sup> And the Lord said, “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. <sup>7</sup> “Which 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’? <sup>8</sup> But 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’? <sup>9</sup> He does not thank the slave because he did the things which were commanded, does he? <sup>10</sup> So 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.’” – Luke 17:3-10

- Does ‘be on your guard’ have to do with not being a ‘stumbling block’ or with regard to forgiveness? Yes!

We need to be ‘on guard’ against a lack of mercy toward others that causes others, as well as ourselves, to be hindered in trusting God and loving people.

- Does ‘if your brother sins, rebuke him’ mean every time he sins? Or just sometimes? Sometimes.

Are there any exceptions to ‘if your brother sins, rebuke him’? Are we to point out every thing we possible could point out that is wrong in another person? Wrong action? Wrong words? Wrong attitude? Wrong facial expressions?

Is there a place for evaluating ‘offenses’? sinful offense? Simple offense (I simply didn’t like what they said!)

<sup>12</sup> Then the disciples \*came and \*said to Him, “Do You know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this statement?” <sup>13</sup> But He answered and said, “Every plant which My heavenly Father did not plant shall be uprooted. <sup>14</sup> Let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind. And if a blind man guides a blind man, both will fall into a pit.” – Matthew 15:12-14

Is there a place for overlooking ‘offenses’?

A man’s discretion makes him slow to anger, And it is his glory to **overlook** a transgression. – Proverbs 19:11

How do I know when a sinful offense needs to be addressed?

Let all **bitterness** and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. – Ephesians 4:31

See to it that no one comes short of the grace of God; that no root of **bitterness** springing up causes trouble, and by it many be defiled; - Hebrews 12:15

<sup>8</sup> But no one can tame the tongue; *it is* a restless evil *and* full of deadly poison. <sup>9</sup> With it we bless *our* Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the likeness of God; <sup>10</sup> from the same mouth come *both* blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be this way. <sup>11</sup> Does a fountain send out from the same opening *both* fresh and bitter *water*? – James 3:8-11

- Does ‘sins’ and ‘returns’ ‘seven times a day’ refer to seven different sins or seven times sinning in the same way? Yes!
- Does ‘I repent’ mean ‘I won’t do that again!’ or ‘I won’t sin against you again!’? No!
- Doesn’t saying ‘I repent’ seven times a day sound like ‘I don’t repent’?! Yes!
- Why do the disciples say ‘Increase our faith!’? Because living with a serial sinner seems impossible!
- How does Jesus respond? (1) The size of your faith is not the issue. (2) The issue is what you think life is about. Life is not about people and God serving us, but about us serving people (who sin against us) and us serving God (in obedience).

Do we need more faith to forgive like Jesus commands?

No, the size of your faith is not the issue.

No, the issue is what we expect life to be about.

Life is not about others serving us but us serving others.

Life is about obeying God regardless of the circumstances.

Life is about depending on God for the grace to do this.

- How can we tell if we think life is about people serving us and God serving us? We think we should, at least, be thanked by sinners and by God when we obey God and show mercy!

We should not think we should be ‘thanked’ for forgiving, being merciful to sinners (even though we have been sinned against terribly).

We should not be upset if people don’t thank us for doing what we should. (I was kind and served them and they never said ‘Thank you!’)

- God commands us to be serial forgivers. (to forgive all who sin against us)

God commands us to be serial forgivers for serial sinners. (not just one forgiveness per person, please!) (not just for those who stop sinning against us in that way)

- We are to love others by embracing a readiness to forgive regardless of the offense.
- We are to trust God for the justice to be done in regard to each offense.

In light of the previous parable, trusting God for divine justice is a key for forgiveness. (Romans 12)

- The story of the forgiven servant who refuses to forgive. (Matthew 18:21-35)

<sup>21</sup> Then Peter came and said to Him, “Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?” <sup>22</sup> Jesus \*said to him, “I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven. <sup>23</sup> “For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. <sup>24</sup> When he had begun to settle *them*, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. <sup>25</sup> But since he did not have *the means* to repay, his lord commanded him to be sold, along with his wife and children and all that he had, and repayment to be made. <sup>26</sup> So the slave fell *to the ground* and prostrated himself before him, saying, ‘Have patience with me and I will repay you everything.’ <sup>27</sup> And the lord of that slave felt compassion and released him and forgave him the debt. <sup>28</sup> But that slave went out and found one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and he seized him and *began to choke him*, saying, ‘Pay back what you owe.’ <sup>29</sup> So his fellow slave fell *to the ground* and *began to plead* with him, saying, ‘Have patience with me and I will repay you.’ <sup>30</sup> But he was unwilling and went and threw him in prison until he should pay back what was owed. <sup>31</sup> So when his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were deeply grieved and came and reported to their lord all that had happened. <sup>32</sup> Then summoning him, his lord \*said to him, ‘You wicked slave, I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. <sup>33</sup> Should you not also have had mercy on your fellow slave, in the same way that I had mercy on you?’ <sup>34</sup> And his lord, moved with anger, handed him over to the torturers until he should repay all that was owed him. <sup>35</sup> My heavenly Father will also do the same to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart.” – Matthew 18:21-35

- Do you have any serial sinners in your life?
- Are you a serial forgiver?
- If not, why not?

### **3. We need to trust God to be our Serial Forgiver.**

‘A mother once approached Napoleon seeking a pardon for her son. The emperor replied that the young man had committed a certain offense twice and justice demanded death. "But I

don't ask for justice," the mother explained. "I plead for mercy." "But your son does not deserve mercy," Napoleon replied. "Sir," the woman cried, "it would not be mercy if he deserved it, and mercy is all I ask for." "Well, then," the emperor said, "I will have mercy." And he spared the woman's son. - Luis Palau, Experiencing God's Forgiveness, Multnomah Press, 1984.

- Is a life of mercy based on what people deserve? No!

So 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.'" – Luke 17:10

- How do we know that trust in God underlies this command to love in this way?

(1) All God's commands are commands to love.

(2) All God's commands to love people in a certain way are commands to be like Him.

(3) God continually forgives us day in and day out even though we not only sin innumerable times a day, but we continue to sin in the same way over and over again!

(4) And yet, he does not look at us when we say 'I repent!' and say, 'No, you don't! Get out of here!'

- What is the greatest reason to forgive and live a life of mercy?

Because it's what we ought to do!

1. Because it's what God does in our relationship with Him.

<sup>14</sup> If I then, the Lord and the Teacher, washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. <sup>15</sup> For I gave you an example that you also should do as I did to you.

<sup>16</sup> Truly, truly, I say to you, a slave is not greater than his master, nor *is* one who is sent greater than the one who sent him. – John 13:14-16

Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you. – Ephesians 4:32

2. Because God has promised justice.

<sup>17</sup> Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Respect what is right in the sight of all men.

<sup>18</sup> If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men. <sup>19</sup> Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath *of God*, for it is written,

“VENGEANCE IS MINE, I WILL REPAY,” says the Lord. <sup>20</sup> “BUT IF YOUR ENEMY IS HUNGRY, FEED HIM, AND IF HE IS THIRSTY, GIVE HIM A DRINK; FOR IN SO DOING YOU WILL HEAP



BURNING COALS ON HIS HEAD.”<sup>21</sup> Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. – Romans 12:17-21

Forgiving repeatedly sinners who sin against us repeatedly is what we ‘ought’ to do, because that is what God does for us and for them.

We have to focus on God, the Serial Forgiver, not the offending person, the serial sinner.

There I will meet with you; and from above the **mercy** seat, from between the two cherubim which are upon the ark of the testimony, I will speak to you about all that I will give you in commandment for the sons of Israel. – Exodus 25:22

But God, being rich in **mercy**, because of His great love with which He loved us, - Ephesians 2:4

Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive **mercy** and find grace to help in time of need. – Hebrews 4:16

Therefore, He had to be made like His brethren in all things, so that He might become a **merciful** and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. - Hebrews 2:17

Should you not also have had **mercy** on your fellow slave, in the same way that I had **mercy** on you?’ – Matthew 18:33

- We are to worship God in light of His incredible patience and mercy in Jesus toward sinners.
  - But doesn’t grace come through faith? And isn’t our faith to grow? How does this fit in?
  - Faith grows as the Object of our faith grows!
  - The key is the Object of our faith, not the size of it.
  - The Object of our faith is God and all He has revealed (truth, commands, promises) in His Word.
  - The God of the Bible has revealed Himself as a Serial Forgiver for serial sinners!
  - We are called to be like God.

Aren’t you glad God never tires of forgiving? Why? Because the issue of justice has been settled! (cross or judgment day)

So it is for us too!

- The story of consequences for David’s unlawful census. (2 Samuel 24:10-14)

<sup>10</sup> Now David's heart troubled him after he had numbered the people. So David said to the LORD, "I have sinned greatly in what I have done. But now, O LORD, please take away the iniquity of Your servant, for I have acted very foolishly." <sup>11</sup> When David arose in the morning, the word of the LORD came to the prophet Gad, David's seer, saying, <sup>12</sup> "Go and speak to David, 'Thus the LORD says, "I am offering you three things; choose for yourself one of them, which I will do to you.'"" <sup>13</sup> So Gad came to David and told him, and said to him, "Shall seven years of famine come to you in your land? Or will you flee three months before your foes while they pursue you? Or shall there be three days' pestilence in your land? Now consider and see what answer I shall return to Him who sent me." <sup>14</sup> Then David said to Gad, "I am in great distress. Let us now fall into the hand of the LORD for His mercies are great, but do not let me fall into the hand of man." – 2 Samuel 24:10-14

How do you need to trust God?

- Rest in Jesus for pardon and perfection? (Trust Him as your Serial Forgiver?)
- Hope in God for help and happiness? (Trust Him to deal with issues of justice?)

How do you need to love?

- Think of one person you have not forgiven or are having trouble forgiving.
- What will you do in light of this word from God?
- Will you forgive?
- What will you say to God, the Serial Forgiver, if you don't?