

THE KINGDOM DUTIES OF UNWORTHY SERVANTS

LUKE 17:1-10

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In our passage from Dr. Luke's gospel this morning, Jesus continues to teach the disciples what it means to be a true Kingdom disciple in contrast to the Pharisees and their disciples. Jesus is continuing to warn his disciples of how to live in reliance upon his grace by continuing to "beware the leaven of the Pharisees" in the larger context (Luke 12:1).

Remember that in this larger context of Jesus' Kingdom teaching, he is soberly warning the disciples about how they are supposed to live in contrast to the world and to even the way the Pharisees and Teachers of Israel had taught. Jesus uses these warnings as the means to make his disciples more holy and thoughtful with regard to how they live each day of their lives.

Christians have indeed been redeemed from our sins by the blood of Christ Jesus. We have been made children by the grace of God and we are no longer slaves to sin (Rom. 6:1-14)- *but we still sin and are tempted daily*. Jesus warns against the temptations that inevitably are to come, particularly the temptation NOT to forgive a brother who repents and asks forgiveness.

In our passage today, Jesus wants His people to take temptation and sin seriously and to avoid being the reason a "little one" of his stumbles! He wants His people to understand the power of faith in God, especially in our forgiving other brethren who sin against us numerous times and then repentantly seek forgiveness.

We are reminded that as Kingdom Disciples we are not to think merely individualistically in terms of our relationship with Christ, but *we are to think as a community*, like a family who seeks to help one another in our pursuit of righteousness for His Name's sake.

As we proceed further through Jesus' teachings and his very challenging Kingdom demands and duties, we should be reminded that from God's eternal perspective, God's chosen people will persevere to the end without falling away (Eph. 1:3-14; Rom. 8:28-39; John 10:29-30). In the larger Scriptures we are taught many times about sin from God's sovereign perspective.

In Jesus' teaching sometimes, we see more emphasis on the human response to preaching and teaching, particularly as he commands men everywhere to repent! The reason for Jesus' focus is that warnings against error and sobering sayings against potential sins *are*

the means by which God in his sovereignty helps his people to be faithful, obedient and persevering in their faith!

When we come to passages like the one today in Dr. Luke's gospel, we should keep this in mind. Jesus warns with a heightened intensity and in almost a completely shocking manner so that his true disciples will take seriously their call to be disciples; that his disciples will teach others to take seriously this call, and that God's people will persevere to the end. In other words, God ordains the end of our journey as well as the means by which we get to and complete our journey as his disciples.

Jesus' warning against potential sins is our ongoing discipline from God through His Word. How many writers have thanked their publishers for keeping them on track and making them meet the deadlines? How many parents continue to teach their children to be hard working and to be careful to avoid laziness in youth?

These are means of discipline by which a person gets to the end. We thank God that he continued to warn us through his Word; the writer thanks his publisher for giving him good pressure when the bestselling book is completed; the child (hopefully!) thanks the parent for helping them not to be lazy when they realize that they are those who do their work unto the Lord. We want to remember the way God ordains the means as well as the ends of our salvation in Christ.

Temptation and Sin

^{ESV} Luke 17:1-10: And he said to his disciples, "Temptations to sin are sure to come, but woe to the one through whom they come!"² 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.

Temptations are part of our ongoing struggle against sin as Kingdom Disciples.

As the people of God, we must take temptation and sin seriously. Notice in v. 1a, Jesus is addressing specifically his disciples ("And he said to his disciples..."; although the Pharisees are in hearing distance from Jesus *if they have ears to hear*).

Jesus says with great emphasis in the Greek "Impossible it is for stumbling blocks NOT to come" (ἀνένδεκτόν ἐστιν τοῦ τὰ σκάνδαλα μὴ ἐλθεῖν). The Greek word for "temptations"-ESV is in Greek *skandalon* or "stumbling blocks" (cf. Luke 7:23). Jesus is saying that occasions for stumbling as disciples are *inevitable* and so we must be on guard (v. 3a; cf. 1 Peter 1:13). The NASB translates this well: "It is *inevitable* that stumbling blocks should come." *Temptations will come in the Christian community.*

What are some of these temptations or stumbling blocks? A disregard for the spiritual good of other "little ones" as we have seen in the examples of the previous parables in the larger context: the Pharisees with their hypocritical disregard and lack of love for the repentant tax collectors, sinners, and others in need of help and healing ("the poor, crippled, blind, and lame" -Luke 14:12-14); the unforgiving older brother in relation to

his younger brother; the rich man's lavish life and lack of mercy in his relation to the poor man Lazarus (15:11-32; 16:19-31).

These temptations or stumbling blocks (or "hindrances"- Moffatt's translation) can be any kind of spiritual harm that hinders one's service to God. Jesus is vague as to what kind of extent of damage the spiritual harm does; he means any stumbling blocks that cause his "little ones" to sin whether on a small scale like attitudes and habits, to a larger scale of plain apostasy or causing one to leave the faith. Leon Morris wrote: "All hindrances to the spiritual life are included, but temptations to sin are clearly the worst of these. They are inevitable, but this does not mean that anyone who causes them is blameless" (*Luke*, pg. 279).

The stumbling blocks can include that which leads some who profess their faith to commit apostasy by leaving the visible church altogether revealing that they were never Christians. The reason it seems that Jesus is purposely vague about the extent of these temptations or what kind of stumbling blocks these are is so that all of his disciples might remain ***focused on the seriousness of the warning itself and ponder anew how we teach and live before others in the Christian community.***

Spiritual stumbling blocks are inevitable because of our sinful condition. Jesus wants us to take our condition seriously *especially as we live in a Christian community or congregation of sinners saved by grace.* We should not trust our own sinful hearts (You don't do you? I always worry when someone says: "I feel deep in my heart that this is right"- *-shudder, shiver!!*). Jeremiah 17:9 says: "The heart is desperately wicked who can know it?!" Listen to God's Word (cf. 16:29-31)- "They have Moses and the Prophets, let them listen to them!"

This particularly applies to those in teaching leadership roles (such as the Pharisees and Teachers of the Law) as well as parents who instruct their children. The general emphasis here in Luke 17 is that spiritual harm will come to some ***and has because of Israel's teachers.*** Jesus is especially referring here to error in teaching that leads people astray, as many other passages in Scriptures teach concerning the danger that comes from false teaching and theological error (Phil. 3:18-20; Col. 3:2; 2 Tim. 3:1-5; 2 Pet. 2:1-3; 1 John 4:4-6). For example:

ESV 2 Peter 2:1-3: ***But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing upon themselves swift destruction. 2 And many will follow their sensuality, and because of them the way of truth will be blasphemed. 3 And in their greed they will exploit you with false words. Their condemnation from long ago is not idle, and their destruction is not asleep.***

ESV 1 John 4:4-6: ***Little children, you are from God and have overcome them, for he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world. 5 They are from the world; therefore they speak from the world, and the world listens to them. 6 We are from God. Whoever knows God listens to us; whoever is not from God does not listen to us. By this we know the Spirit of truth and the spirit of error.***

The false teaching that is in view here is not necessarily blatant and obvious heresy, but can also be legalism or doctrinal imbalance for which Jesus has many times rebuked the Pharisees and Teachers of the Law for practicing.

As Jesus scolded the Pharisees in Matthew 23, telling them that when they make a disciple they make the disciple “twice the son of hell that they are” (Matt. 23:15). Why? Because they lead them away from the simple faith in Jesus Christ.

ESV Matthew 23:15 Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel across sea and land to make a single proselyte, and when he becomes a proselyte, you make him twice as much a child of hell as yourselves.

The Apostle James warns of teachers being judged with greater strictness because of their influence:

ESV James 3:1 Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.

Jesus wants all of his disciples to realize how easy it is for them to cause someone to stumble *especially those who teach and instruct and live as examples to others in the Kingdom* (like pastors, elders, leaders, parents, etc). Teachers and officers in Christ’s Church must give extra care that they are teaching the gospel of Jesus as clearly as possible, and that they are preaching and teaching the people of God Scripture alone - and not their own pet doctrines, ideas, and philosophies of men. This is very serious business. As the Apostle Paul says that a steward of God’s Gospel must be faithful (1 Cor. 4:1ff; cf. 2 Tim. 4:1ff).

The emphasis of Jesus here is twofold: (1) Take seriously your sinful condition; (2) Watch your life and doctrine closely. This is similar to what the Apostle Paul told Pastor Timothy when he was serving at Ephesus:

ESV 1 Timothy 4:16 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.

[Excursus] The Westminster Larger Catechism is extremely helpful in reminding us of our duties before God and man “in community” as they interpret the Fifth Commandment with three categories in which we all find ourselves at times: superiors, inferiors, and equals:

WLC 126 What is the general scope of the fifth commandment? A. The general scope of the fifth commandment is, the performance of those duties which we mutually owe in our several relations, as inferiors, superiors, or equals.(1) (1)Eph. 5:21; 1 Pet. 2:17; Rom. 12:10

WLC 127 What is the honour that inferiors owe to their superiors? A. The honour which inferiors owe to their superiors is, all due reverence in heart,(1) word,(2) and behaviour;(3) prayer and thanksgiving for them;(4) imitation of their virtues and graces;(5) willing obedience to their lawful commands and counsels,(6) due submission to their corrections;(7) fidelity to,(8) defence,(9) and maintenance of their persons and authority according to their several ranks, and the nature of their places;(10) bearing with

their infirmities, and covering them in love,(11) that so they may be an honour to them and to their government.(12) (1)Mal. 1:6; Lev. 19:3 (2)Prov. 31:28; 1 Pet. 3:6 (3)Lev. 19:32; 1 Kings 2:19 (4)1 Tim. 2:1,2 (5)Heb. 13:7; Phil. 3:17 (6)Eph. 6:1,2,5,6,7; 1 Pet. 2:13,14; Rom. 13:1-5; Heb. 13:17; Prov. 4:3,4; Prov. 23:22; Exod. 18:19,24 (7)Heb. 12:9; 1 Pet. 2:18,19,20 (8)Tit. 2:9,10 (9)1 Sam. 26:15,16; 2 Sam. 18:3; Esther 6:2 (10)Matt. 22:21; Rom. 13:6,7; 1 Tim. 5:17,18; Gal. 6:6; Gen. 45:11; Gen. 47:12 (11)1 Pet. 2:18; Prov. 23:22; Gen. 9:23 (12)Ps. 127:3-5; Prov. 31:23

WLC 128 What are the sins of inferiors against their superiors? A. The sins of inferiors against their superiors are, all neglect of the duties required toward them;(1) envying at,(2) contempt of,(3) and rebellion(4) against, their persons(5) and places,(6) in their lawful counsels,(7) commands, and corrections;(8) cursing, mocking,(9) and all such refractory and scandalous carriage, as proves a shame and dishonour to them and their government.(10) (1)Matt. 15:4-6 (2)Numb. 11:28,29 (3)1 Sam. 8:7; Isa. 3:5 (4)2 Sam. 15:1-12 (5)Exod. 21:15 (6)1 Sam. 10:27 (7)1 Sam. 2:25 (8)Deut. 21:18-21 (9)Prov. 30:11,17 (10)Prov. 19:26

WLC 129 What is required of superiors towards their inferiors? A. It is required of superiors according to that power they receive from God, and that relation wherein they stand, to love,(1) pray for,(2) and bless their inferiors,(3) to instruct,(4) counsel, and admonish them;(5) countenancing,(6) commending,(7) and rewarding such as do well;(8) and discountenancing,(9) reprovng, and chastising such as do ill;(10) protecting,(11) and providing for them all things necessary for soul(12) and body:(13) and by grave, wise, holy, and exemplary carriage, to procure glory to God,(14) honour to themselves,(15) and so to preserve that authority which God hath put upon them.(16) (1)Col. 3:19; Tit. 2:4 (2)1 Sam. 12:23; Job 1:5 (3)1 Kings 8:55,56; Heb. 7:7; Gen. 49:28 (4)Deut. 6:6,7 (5)Eph. 6:4 (6)1 Pet. 3:7 (7)1 Pet. 2:14; Rom. 13:3 (8)Esth. 6:3 (9)Rom. 13:3,4 (10)Prov. 29:15; 1 Pet. 2:14 (11)Job 29:12-17; Isa. 1:10,17 (12)Eph. 6:4 (13)1 Tim. 5:8 (14)1 Tim. 4:12; Tit. 2:3-5 (15)1 Kings 3:28 (16)Tit. 2:15

WLC 130 What are the sins of superiors? A. The sins of superiors are, besides the neglect of the duties required of them,(1) an inordinate seeking of themselves,(2) their own glory,(3) ease, profit, or pleasure,(4) commanding things unlawful,(5) or not in the power of inferiors to perform;(6) counselling,(7) encouraging,(8) or favouring them in that which is evil;(9) dissuading, discouraging, or discountenancing them in that which is good;(10) correcting them unduly;(11) careless exposing, or leaving them to wrong, temptation, and danger;(12) provoking them to wrath,(13) or any way dishonouring themselves, or lessening their authority, by an unjust, indiscreet, rigorous, or remiss behaviour.(14) (1)Ezek. 34:2-4 (2)Phil. 2:21 (3)John 5:44; John 7:18 (4)Isa. 56:10,11; Deut. 17:17 (5)Dan. 3:4-6; Acts 4:17,18 (6)Exod. 5:10-18; Matt. 23:2,4 (7)Matt. 14:8 compared with Mark 6:24 (8)2 Sam. 13:28 (9)1 Sam. 3:13 (10)John 7:46-49; Col. 3:21; Exod. 5:17 (11)1 Pet. 2:18-20; Heb. 12:10; Deut. 25:3 (12)Gen. 38:11,26; Acts 18:17 (13)Eph. 6:4 (14)Gen. 9:21; 1 Kings 12:13-16; 1 Kings 1:6; 1 Sam. 2:29-31

WLC 131 What are the duties of equals? A. The duties of equals are, to regard the dignity and worth of each other,(1) in giving honour to go one before another;(2) and to rejoice in each others gifts and advancement, as their own.(3) (1)1 Pet. 2:17 (2)Rom. 12:10 (3)Rom. 12:15,16; Phil. 2:3,4

WLC 132 What are the sins of equals? A. The sins of equals are, besides the neglect of the duties required,(1) the undervaluing of the worth,(2) envying the gifts,(3) grieving at the advancement of prosperity one of another;(4) and usurping pre-eminence one over another.(5) (1)Rom. 13:8 (2)2 Tim. 3:3 (3)Acts 7:9; Gal. 5:26 (4)Numb. 12:2; Esth. 6:12,13 (5)3 John 9; Luke 22:24

WLC 133 What is the reason annexed to the fifth commandment, the more to enforce it? A. The reason annexed to the fifth commandment, in these words, That thy days may be long upon the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee,(1) is an express promise of long life and prosperity, as far as it shall serve for God's glory and their own good, to all such as keep this commandment.(2) (1)Exod. 20:12 (2)Deut. 5:16; 1 Kings 8:25; Eph. 6:2,3

Potential Sin and a Woe

These potential spiritual stumbling blocks can cause Jesus' "little ones" to sin. Jesus pronounces a serious and sobering WOE upon those who cause one of his "little ones" to stumble!

Now understand that in v. 2, ***the woe is not the millstone*** (the woe is contrasted to the millstone!). Jesus is saying that it would be better to be drowned in the ocean with a heavy millstone chained to one's neck *rather than be a recipient of his woe!* The woe of Jesus is far worse (cf. Matthew 23); this is a woe of condemnation for unfaithfulness and unbelief (that is implied toward the Pharisees and Teachers of Israel in this context).

What is a millstone? A "millstone" refers to a heavy upper stone used for grinding flour in a large rotary mill driven by a mule or a donkey (Defined in Green, NICNT, pg. 612). A millstone is basically a huge concrete-like heavy rock that if tied to one's neck and thrown into the water, would take you to the wettest, darkest, gloomiest and loneliest place in the sea and cause your death by drowning.

We should be reminded that the sea represented chaos and great mystery to an average Israelite. The Israelites were land people and to have this option of Jesus presented to them as a better one than to be a recipient of his terrible woe is a shocking idea! If anyone as a child or an adult has every been underwater and experienced panic for a moment because they could not come to the surface and they found it hard to breathe, then you know the kind of terror that Jesus is describing about chaining a millstone around one's neck and being helplessly and hopelessly cast into the sea.

Jesus says that drowning in the deepest part of the sea with a heavy millstone around one's neck is ***better than causing one of his "little ones" or disciples to stumble*** (compare with the rich man's torment and anguish in Hades in our last sermon). Bock describes Jesus as saying graphically: "A harsh death would be a 'better deal' than what this one will get from God (*Luke*, Vol. II, pg. 1385).

In the larger context, Jesus is saying that it is better that some in Israel die than to keep the repentant tax collectors and sinners from faith in Jesus; it is better that the rich man die than to keep his food and luxuries that are needful for Lazarus to survive on; it is better for the older brother to die than to be unforgiving and unmerciful to his younger brother. Jesus also sadly applies this woe to Judas who would betray him:

^{ESV} Luke 22:21-22: But behold, the hand of him who betrays me is with me on the table. ²² For the Son of Man goes as it has been determined, but woe to that man by whom he is betrayed!"

Jesus' focus here is to sober all of us as part of our sanctification. We should be reminded that Jesus teaches these things as a means by which he works in us more obedience as we hear and believe. Some will ask: "Why does Jesus say this in such a "hard manner"? Because right teaching from his word and obedience to God's word in the way one lives is extremely serious business!

Jesus wants his disciples to be serious about their life and doctrine! Jesus is primarily addressing the false teaching of the Pharisees and Teachers of the Law as I have pointed out. We should understand in light of this as a reminder that a true disciple cannot lose one's salvation; a true minister, elder, and/or parent who is truly united to Jesus Christ will not be cast into the outer darkness of hell as a recipient of Jesus' woe for making some mistakes theologically throughout their life.

But Jesus may be speaking as the Apostle Paul does in 1 Corinthians 3:10ff about some being saved but losing their reward for unfaithfulness to God and one who has destroyed God's Temple:

ESV 1 Corinthians 3:13-17: each one's work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. ¹⁴ If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. ¹⁵ If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire. ¹⁶ Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? ¹⁷ If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple.

What is clear from this passage is that we must watch our lives and doctrine closely so that we do not cause Jesus' "little ones" to stumble into sin. We all make mistakes with regard to theology and living- -but we must take seriously Jesus' warning and by God's grace, seek the grace from God to be faithful *and continue to be faithful*. This warning emphasizes Jesus' concern for studying our Bibles and learning from those who have been gifted to teach us so that we might grow and grow (be sanctified) in our knowledge of God and the life he has called us to live. This is Jesus' point!

We dare not undermine and/or lessen the forcefulness of Jesus' comparison here between a woe and a millstone; we must heed Jesus' warning and seek the grace to avoid such a thing! Again, remember Luke 12:1-2a and the larger context of Jesus' traveling to Jerusalem, is to use the mistakes of the Pharisees and Teachers of the Law to instruct his disciples and warn them against the errors that they have made and how they have indeed made his "little ones" to stumble:

ESV Luke 12:1-2a: In the meantime, when so many thousands of the people had gathered together that they were trampling one another, he began to say to his disciples first, "Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy." ² Nothing is covered up that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known.

Jesus pronounces a woe upon the one who causes one of his disciples or "little ones" to be tempted to stumble to sin.

Why does he refer to them as "little ones"? "Little ones" was another endearing and tender way Jesus spoke of his beloved chosen ones (or those for whom he came to live, die and be resurrected for; those upon whom God's electing love is extended).

ESV Luke 10:21 In that same hour he rejoiced in the Holy Spirit and said, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will.

ESV Mark 10:24 And the disciples were amazed at his words. But Jesus said to them again, "Children, how difficult it is to enter the kingdom of God!

“Little ones” in the context of Luke’s Gospel are those like the repentant tax collectors and sinners (15:1-2) that have been received and restored by God and welcomed by Jesus into the covenant community. These “little ones” or disciples should be taught by God’s grace how to serve their Lord faithfully in word and deed. Bock wrote helpfully: “The reference to ‘little ones’ need not be seen as a reference to children. The image is a tender way of saying that disciples need care and protection like a parent gives a child” (Vol. II, pg. 1386).

Jesus’ focus on the little ones is to show that all of the Kingdom disciples are *His disciples* and he loves them tenderly and takes very seriously when they are taught incorrectly or unbiblically. The woe of Jesus is to remind all those in position of teaching, as well as all disciples in His Kingdom, to pay attention to one’s teaching, example and be aware of potential spiritual harm that could come through us to Jesus’ “little ones”.

In today’s church, I believe we are experiencing a time that the Apostle Paul spoke of in his second letter to Timothy; Paul wrote in warning to Timothy:

ESV 2 Timothy 4:3-5: For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions,⁴ and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths.⁵ As for you, always be sober-minded, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry.

For Jesus and Paul correct and faithful teaching (“sound teaching”) are always going to be unpopular and easy to reject. A lot of the practical problems in the visible church today are because of unbiblical theological problems that are not addressed and corrected according to God’s Word. The Word of God is clear about making sure that we teach and live according to God’s Word. God’s Word is the only infallible rule for our faith and this includes what we believe and how we live!

Let us continue to be reformed, *but continually reforming according to Scripture*. May we never forget how easy it is for sinners to “not endure sound teaching” (lit. “not persevere in sound teaching”) but to accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions. Let us never forget how easy it is for sinners to turn away from the truth to myths (cf. Rom. 1:19-25) and how we forget to be sober-minded with regard to our life and doctrine. Jesus is communicating that this is extremely serious business regardless of how little people might think of theology and doctrine these days- -Jesus thought that right thinking led to right living!

As true Kingdom disciples, we must be on our guard against causing anyone to sin and stumble *especially if we are in leadership and teaching positions in Christ's Church*, and we must also in reliance upon God's grace to ***be merciful and forgiving***.

Repentance and Forgiveness

³ ***Pay attention to yourselves! If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him,*** ⁴ ***and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, saying, 'I repent,' you must forgive him.*** ⁵ ***The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!"*** ⁶ ***And the Lord said, "If you had faith like a grain of mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it would obey you.***

Jesus says ***"Pay attention to yourselves!"*** [προσέχετε] or ***"Be on your guard"*** or ***"Take heed to yourselves"*** –v. 3a (A present-tense command in Greek, and a sobering warning to take temptation and sin very seriously; the meaning is to continue to pay attention and be on one's guard as Jesus' disciple). Jesus is teaching that his disciples must be on their constant guard against causing spiritual harm to others through their teaching, examples, attitude or neglect of duty (Geldenhuys, pg. 431).

How does this command relate to forgiving our brother? Kingdom discipleship is helping one another to be faithful in our obedience to Christ. Disciples are called to work together by God's grace to seek righteousness and Christ-likeness.

We are not to cause each other to sin against God, but rather "rebuke" each other with gentleness and love (v. 3). "Rebuke" sounds like such a strong word in our day and time, but the meaning of the word in which Jesus uses describes a sensitivity to the danger of sin, and helping a brother and sister to see how that sin can hurt them and Jesus' "little ones" and how they must live their life in reliance upon God's grace *according to what the Bible teaches* [The Greek word ἐπιτιμάω *epitimaō* means to give a command, order; rebuke].

When we see others sins, "we who are spiritual" and not merely desiring to meddle in the affairs of others, should seek to rebuke them for their sins. As the Apostle Paul says elsewhere:

^{ESV} ***Galatians 6:1 Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted.***

We have a responsibility to each other NOT to judge each other privately and secretly gossip about our brothers and sisters in Christ. If those in the covenant community sin, we are to be quick to speak to them about it so that it does not do unnecessary damage to others spiritually (17:1-2) and cause any of Jesus' "little ones" to stumble.

This means that we are all accountable to each other under God and His Word. This is one of the reasons why every person who calls themselves "Christian" should be a member of a local congregation of Christ's people.

There should be real accountability among the brethren and a formal commitment and vow to God and man that one will live out the Christian faith and submit formally in life and doctrine to the elders of a congregation. It is also equally (if not more) important that the elders be accountable and thus the reason why the teaching elder or pastor is a member of a regional body of elders called the presbytery.

We should understand that we do not desire to hurt others by pointing out their sins and rebuking them, but we do desire to help them (especially in light of the fact that they could be spiritually harming others). We should do this with regard to false teaching and error as well as false thinking and behavior that other brothers have yet to consider. Because we must be forgiving, we must do this humbly knowing that we too fall short of God's glory.

The important idea that Jesus is communicating here is that God gives us each other as a community to help sharpen each other and to make us more like Christ. Growth in Christ and pursuit of holiness is no mere private affair (that is none of nobody else's business!). Jesus is teaching that our doctrine and lives are indeed everyone in the Christian community's business. But this must be done gently and humbly and sympathetically as recipients of God's grace.

As Darrell Bock wrote helpfully: "For Jesus, faith is not merely a private affair, but something the community pursues together. The community of believers is a family in the sense that the best interests of each member is a concern of each other member. Thus, the call to rebuke is the exercise of a familial responsibility (Vol. II, pg. 1387).

If this is done graciously, this should not turn a congregation into fearing that **BIG BROTHER IS WATCHING YOU**. Jesus is not teaching us as his Kingdom disciples to judge our brothers and other sinners (Matt. 7:1-5; Luke 6:37-38) nor does he mean for disciples to sit on the sidelines at each fellowship meal or each worship service to try and find someone sinning against God and man.

What Jesus means is that when a brother or sister sins against another brother and sister blatantly and openly and specifically, then it is incumbent upon the one who was sinned against to point this out to the other brother- **-and to be ready and willing to receive the repentant sinner when they repent!** Our reputation as individuals in Christ's visible church should be those who rebuke with love, but also willing and gracious to forgive the repentant!

We are not to be like the Pharisees and Teachers of the Law unwilling to receive and restore repentant sinners to the covenant community. Rather, we are to be like Jesus in receiving them as God has received them when they repented.

^{ESV} Luke 6:36 Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful.

One of the hardest parts of being Jesus' disciple is being commanded to forgive those who sin against us! Jesus says here that if someone sins against us, and we make that

known to another, and the other person repents, then no matter how many times they continue to offend us, we must forgive if they come to us in repentance.

The only way to get our minds and hearts around this is to understand how much God has forgiven us and how many times we sin against God and how many times we return to him in our discipleship training to ask him to forgive us *one more time* (even when we have resolved “never to do that particularly thing again”; or resolved “never to think that way again” etc.).

Notice that Jesus commands his disciples to be merciful and forgiving, but also to live repentant lives. If one has not repented after they have sinned against us, even if we have shown to them their fault (by faithfully and lovingly rebuking them), then how can we assure them that they have been forgiven? How can we forgive someone who has not yet repented of the actions and/or words committed against us?

This teaches us that Kingdom disciples who live as brothers (v. 3b- “If your brother...”) must be merciful and forgiving, but we must also be faithfully repentant toward other brethren we might offend. This is how we are to live in harmony and unity by God’s grace in Christ Jesus.

Jesus says that we must be willing to forgive and show mercy (like God!) an unlimited amount of times (as many times as one offends, then repents and seeks restoration, then they should be restored through forgiveness). “Without limit” in our forgiveness is what Jesus means when he says “if he sins against you seven times in a day” (v. 4a). Jesus is saying that his disciples must show mercy and forgiveness *again, and again, and again-* as many times as a rebuked brother or sister comes in repentance and asks forgiveness- - that reception and restoration must be extended in brotherly and gracious love.

Forgiveness like daily cross bearing (Luke 9:23) and daily repentance is ongoing and habitual in the believer’s life.

This means that when you have rebuked a brother and/or sister, and when that brother or sister repents and asks your forgiveness *you are to truly forgive and let it go!* You are not to continue to remember their sins against you, and you are not constantly to remind them of their previous failures. You are to keep in mind humbly that you are a sinner too! There have been times when you too have needed rebuke and you repented, and you were forgiven—especially by God!!

Do you think God remembers and brings up the past sins of his people? (The rhetorical answer is “no”- Psalm 103: “As far as the east is from the west so far does God remove our transgression and sin from us.”). We should forgive and forget these past sins- -and we are to forgive *again, and again, and again!*

In the Old Covenant, the people were taught:

ESV **Leviticus 19:17** “You shall not hate your brother in your heart, but you shall reason frankly with your neighbor, lest you incur sin because of him.

There is great wisdom in this Old Testament command that Jesus is interpreting here in Luke 17:3-4. When we do not forgive and restore repentant brothers and sisters, we begin to hate and murder them in our hearts. When we do not “reason frankly” with them or “rebuke” them as Jesus says, then we incur sin because them.

How? Well, this doesn’t mean that a sinner is not culpable for his own sin, but when we do not forgive mercifully a sinner who has repented, we then struggle with sins in our own hearts.

Think about how bitter, unforgiving, and unmerciful some people in this world are! Think about how the Pharisees prided themselves on their godliness and obedience to God as His special servants (cf. 17:7-10) and yet failed to actually love God and their brothers as themselves!

The Pharisees were hypocrites (12:1-2) who did not forgive and show mercy as God had commanded them. They could not see that unforgiveness and failure to restore tax collectors and sinners was in reality hatred and murder, and thus a breaking of God’s law (cf. Matthew 5:21-48).

We incur sin, too, when we fail to use the faith that God has given to us in Christ Jesus to forgive our repentant brothers and sisters. We cannot read other people’s hearts; we can only accept their word at face value. We cannot say to ourselves: “Well, their repentance was not the sort of repentance I was looking for; I want them to do such and such and then I will forgive.”

If our brothers (and sisters are included- “brethren”- plural) seek in a repentant fashion to be forgiven, then we must receive them and forgive them as many times as is necessary. Jesus’ focus is not on our being fully and necessarily satisfied with one’s repentance (I mean after 7 times in one day, that would be hard to believe (cf. v. 5) *that one is truly repentant*). ***Jesus’ focus is on our being willing and able by faith to forgive!***

Increase our faith!

The apostles like us, desire to know HOW to think and live like this as Kingdom disciples (v. 5): “Increase our faith” (literally!). The disciples are asking Jesus to stretch the feeble boundaries of their hearts and lives and to give them supernatural grace to avoid offending others, and to help them to be more loving and merciful and to see others and forgive others as God’s sees and forgives them (cf. Psalm 103: “He knows our frame; that we are dust...”).

It is NOT as if the disciples did not have faith- -NO! Rather, they know who to turn to for help, and they sought more faith from the Lord who granted their faith in the first place; in other words, **they sought for more faith from Jesus by faith**. As the Apostle Paul teaches in Ephesians 2:8-9:

ESV Ephesians 2:8-9: For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God,⁹ not a result of works, so that no one may boast.

The disciples are recognizing that they are not capable on their own to increase their faith. As with believing faith, we are dependent upon Christ for an increase of our faith. We seek the Lord for all things we need to grow in our knowledge and understanding of him *including more faith to believe* (Notice Paul's prayers for believers in Eph. 1:15-23; 3:15ff).

Now our sinful hearts can deceive us and we can (we often do!) fool ourselves sinfully sometimes and say: "Well, God has not granted me the faith to be obedient yet" and other things such as this in order to get out of being obedient to God. This is not what Jesus is saying (nor I!)

Jesus is teaching that we all must seek him daily for the grace and faith that we need to be forgiving and merciful to others. Keeping focused on Jesus who is the source of our faith as well as the object of our faith as Lord and Savior helps all of his disciples to be reminded of the mercy and grace that has been granted to them!

We pray for increased faith *believing that he grants what we ask of him* (Mark 11:24-25), *then we act immediately in forgiveness and extending grace and mercy!* This is the important principle we find in Mark's Gospel and the fuller teaching of Jesus on faith and forgiveness:

Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. ²⁵ And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses."

The disciples are asking Jesus for an increase of faith *especially in circumstances that can be overwhelmingly hard for sinners*. We should be encouraged that even the apostle-disciples need their faith increased. Jesus teaches them and us today that even the smallest amount of faith God can do wonders with!

We should also seek increased faith and prayerfully admit when we do not have enough; especially when we realize how unforgiving and unmerciful we sometimes can be. When seeking in repentance to be forgiven for these sins, we must also ask the Lord for supernatural faith to do what seems impossible for us!

Oftentimes, we need to seek this increased faith specifically in light of a broken relationship where we are harboring bitterness, unforgiveness and even hatred, rather than forgiving our repentant brethren who sin against us.

Notice that Jesus compares a small faith like a mustard seed (cf. Matt. 13:31-32) to be able to do the "impossible" (or that which is impossible for man- -Nothing is impossible with God, Luke 1:37). If one has faith that God has given a disciple through his relationship with Jesus Christ (cf. Eph. 2:8-10), then that person *CAN* forgive.

In fact, the power of that small faith is effective and powerful because of a great God, not because of one's powerful and great faith! The mulberry tree (some translations

sycamine tree which was the black mulberry tree) with deep roots could be uprooted and cast into the sea (v. 6) (an impossibility!), but with faith in God all things are possible!

The rabbis taught that this sycamore-mulberry tree could stay in the ground for over 600 years! Jesus is using this knowledge of rabbinical teaching to express how powerful faith can be when God and His Word is believed. Do you believe?

Greek scholar and professor of New Testament Darrell Bock wrote about the Greek expression of “Be rooted up and planted in the sea”: “A grammatical touch makes the point even stronger. The verb describing the tree’s obedience is in the aorist tense, in a contrary-to-fact condition. It suggests that the tree was ready to obey the command. In effect, the remark says, ‘If you had done this, it would have obeyed you!’” (*Luke*, NIVAC, pg. 439).

The great Reformed Baptist preacher and teacher Charles Haddon Spurgeon said faithfully and biblically in the 19th century uses Jesus’ imagery here of the deep-rooted tree and the spiritual meaning of Jesus’ saying: “Ah, my bad temper is rooted deep in my heart: as a sycamore (mulberry) tree takes hold of the earth by its roots, so an ill temper has gone into the very depth of my nature. I am constitutionally quick tempered. From my very birth I have found it hard to forgive.” If you have faith my brother, you can say to that sycamore (mulberry) tree deeply rooted within your sinful heart: ‘Be thou plucked up by the roots’! (*Sermons of Charles Spurgeon*, Vol. 22, pg. 574).

There is always a sure victory for those whose faith is in God (see Hebrews 11).

“Unworthy Servants”

⁷ ***“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’? ⁸ 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’? ⁹ Does he thank the servant because he did what was commanded? ¹⁰ So you also, when you have done all that you were commanded, say, ‘We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty.’”***

Even when we learn to be careful NOT to cause others to stumble and even when we learn to forgive and extend mercy, and even when we finally understand the power of faith (the little faith as small as a mustard seed), ***we are still tempted to have unrealistic and proud illusions of grandeur before God’s throne!***

We are all tempted (as Christ’s disciples were) to think of ourselves more honorable and noble and loving than others (even when we just do what is commanded of us by the LORD- -remember the disciples were always asking Jesus who was the greatest among them?! cf. Luke 9:46; 22:24). Even when we show forth our faith in God, we tend toward pride in our own faith- -rather than in God who has provided us the faith!

We can even think that our “great faith” ought to merit something before God! This is the point Jesus makes in this mini-parable. At the end of the day, when you have shown

forth caution in your life and walk, and when you have forgiven, and when you have exercised faith in a great God, then you have done your duty.

Jesus ends his message with a warning against *pride and self-satisfaction*. He teaches that all of us are merely “unworthy” or “unprofitable” servants to our Lord and Master. If we live as those who do not cause “little ones” to stumble; if we live forgiving and merciful toward our brothers, we can still think that it was we ourselves that should get credit and not the work of grace that God is doing within us!

We should understand that WE CAN do our duty before God only because of what God has done in us!

As we remember in Philippians 2:12-13: We are to work out our salvation with fear and trembling because it is *God who works in us to will and act according to his good pleasure*. We give thanks to God for his grace and we live obediently as his servants *just because we are commanded to live this way and enableD to live this way by God’s grace alone!*

Jesus is not saying that God does not honor faithful service, but that we are not to grow proud and presumptuous before God in our service. Jesus said earlier in his ministry about God’s honoring service (cf. Matthew 25:21):

ESV Luke 12:37 Blessed are those servants whom the master finds awake when he comes. Truly, I say to you, he will dress himself for service and have them recline at table, and he will come and serve them.

In this brief parable where Jesus is expecting a negative answer to his questions, he reminds the people of how slaves serve masters in the ancient world. A slave does not come in from working all day and doing his duty for his master to do anything more than serve (he is not waited on or thanked for his service). In fact, to thank someone or for more specifically for a master to have thanked a servant in the ancient world, it would have placed him under obligation of debt to him.

Jesus is saying that when we have done our duty for the day, whether it is living soberly with regard to the reality of us causing others spiritual harm or to cause others to stumble, or whether it’s rebuking and forgiving those who repent, we are still unprofitable servants. The faith we have shown was a result of God’s grace and working in us; God is not indebted to us for our service in His Kingdom.

In fact, because of his grace we are doing what we were created to do in serving our Great and Holy Creator, and it is he who has redeemed us to serve him- -so we are not doing him any “favours” by being obedient. The Law calls us to complete perfect; Jesus says: “Be perfect as your Heavenly Father is perfect (Matt. 5:48). Even our obedience by faith is imperfect and tainted by sin.

We should live humbly in this world, by faith, and thankful for the grace of God we find each day of our lives.

The only servant-slave of God that was worthy of eternal reward was Jesus Christ! Jesus Christ came to teach the truth of God and show the way to God (cf. John 14:1-6). As the Great Prophet of God, Jesus came to make known God's ways and to instruct the people of God how to think of God and how to live. He is the faithful Teacher *par excellence*.

Jesus is also the one who made it possible for us to be restored and forgiven with God. While we were enemies of God, Christ died for us (Rom. 5:6-11). We have peace with God because of Christ's forgiving mercy and grace. We are saved by grace alone through faith and this is not of ourselves, it is the gift of God (Eph. 2:8).

In light of the perfect life and work of Jesus Christ for his people, we are to be a people who are careful and sober with regard to our life and doctrine. We are to be a lovingly rebuking and forgiving people; we are to understand that we are rewarded as God's servants because of the grace that has been given to us in Christ. In Christ, we are heirs of all things, and commended by God as if we ourselves perfectly kept the law that Jesus kept for us. In Christ, we are debt-free before God to freely live as his servants doing our duty before God because of his grace to us.

Do you believe?

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Scripture Lesson

^{ESV} **Leviticus 19:17** "You shall not hate your brother in your heart, but you shall reason frankly with your neighbor, lest you incur sin because of him.

^{ESV} **Matthew 6:13-15:** And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. ¹⁴ For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, ¹⁵ but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

Matthew 18:15-35: "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. ¹⁶ But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. ¹⁷ If 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. ¹⁸ Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. ¹⁹ Again I say to you, if two of

you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven.²⁰ For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them."²¹ 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?"²² Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven."²³ "Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants.²⁴ When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents.²⁵ And since he could not pay, his master ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made.²⁶ So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.'²⁷ And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt.²⁸ But when that same servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii, and seizing him, he began to choke him, saying, 'Pay what you owe.'²⁹ So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.'³⁰ He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt.³¹ When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their master all that had taken place.³² Then his master summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me.³³ And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?'³⁴ And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt.³⁵ So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart."

^{ESV} **1 Peter 1:13-25:** Therefore, preparing your minds for action, and being sober-minded, set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ.¹⁴ As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance,¹⁵ but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct,¹⁶ since it is written, "You shall be holy, for I am holy."¹⁷ And if you call on him as Father who judges impartially according to each one's deeds, conduct yourselves with fear throughout the time of your exile,¹⁸ knowing that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold,¹⁹ but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot.²⁰ He was foreknown before the foundation of the world but was made manifest in the last times for your sake,²¹ who through him are believers in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are in God.²² Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart,²³ since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God;²⁴ for "All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls,²⁵ but the word of the Lord remains forever." And this word is the good news that was preached to you.