

Series Gospel of Luke

This Message More Requirements for Disciples

Scripture Luke 17:1-10

Throughout our studies of the Gospel of Luke, we have focused on the public ministry activities of Jesus, but the secondary purpose of these studies has been a focus on Jesus' training of His disciples.

The past two weeks we thought about the occasion, described in chapter 14, when Jesus was invited to the home of a prominent Pharisee to share a Sabbath meal. Before the meal He healed a man. During the meal, He lectured the Pharisees about their hypocrisy, their self-serving ambitions, and their need to minister to the outcasts of society.

In chapters 15 and 16 Jesus presented five parables which, in their own way, once again called attention to the selfishness, self-righteousness, and spiritual corruption of the Pharisees. In this message, I am jumping to chapter 17 because I want to concentrate on the training of disciples, not the shortcomings of the Pharisees. The first verses in chapter 17 were a summary of Jesus' time with the Pharisees, and they also had important applications to the disciples.

Read Luke 17:1-10

In these verses Jesus called the attention of His disciples to four distinct topics: He spoke about "stumbling-blocks," forgiveness, faith, and service. There is a logical connection between these topics and Jesus' interaction with the Pharisees in the previous three chapters. Jesus used the sinful attitudes and behaviors of the Pharisees as an illustration of what His disciples should and should not do.

For example, the false teaching and self-centered religious practices of the Pharisees had caused and were causing many Jews to stumble in their faith. Thus Jesus warned His disciples about the seriousness of causing people to stumble. He did not want them to be guilty of leading others into sin. That's in verses 1 and 2.

Next, in verses 3 and 4, Jesus gave instructions about repentance and forgiveness. The disciples were to respond to sinners in a much more gracious way than would the Pharisees. The Pharisees prided themselves on not being sinners like other people. They had “holier-than-thou” attitudes. They reacted to sinners with condemnation. Jesus wanted His disciples to react to sin and sinners in a different way.

When the disciples asked Jesus to increase their faith in verse 5, Jesus informed them that the amount of their faith wasn’t really the issue, since a small amount of faith could accomplish great things. It was the actual existence of faith in a person, which the Pharisees did not manifest, that was important. Finally, in verses 7-10, Jesus informed the disciples that the real issue for them was having the appropriate attitude of a servant. They were not to think more highly of themselves than they ought to think.

These four topics were like a summary of much of His dialogue with the Pharisees. The topics highlighted the need for His disciples to be a much different kind of people. That’s the quick overview of the passage. Now let’s think more deeply about the verses and their application to ourselves.

The first sentence spoken by Jesus was a warning. He did not want His disciples to be the cause of another person’s sin. Evil influential leaders can draw people into sin in many ways — through false teaching, by being bad examples, through lies, trickery, manipulation — there are many possibilities. In the context of this gospel account, it was the religious leaders of Israel who were leading the people in the wrong direction. They were the ones who were the most vocal and visible and vicious in their attacks against Jesus. It was their intention to turn men and women from following Him.

As Jesus said, there are many things in the world that can tempt and draw people into sin. Scripture informs us that such influences come from the devil and the world, as well as evil people. These inducements to sin are “outside” kinds of influences which are beyond the control of individuals. Jesus said that these things “are bound to come.” However, what should be within the control of the followers of Jesus is faithfulness to God and being careful to not give offense to people.

The Greek word used in verse 1 is “skandala,” from which we get the English word “scandal.” A “skandala” was the trigger in a trap, the place where bait was placed in order to attract a victim. Even believers can become a “skandala” or “stumbling block” to others when they fail to obey the teachings of Jesus and influence people in the direction of sin.

Jesus pronounced a “woe” on those who cause people to sin. He didn’t explain what the “woe” was, but we know it was a terrible judgment. It is a far worse fate than drowning because Jesus said, in verse 2, “It would be better for the person who was the stumbling-block to be thrown into the sea with a millstone tied around his neck.” The implication is that the judgment of God against those who cause people to sin will be much worse than physical death. That’s a thought that should make church leaders very careful about what they say and do.

The question in verse 2 concerns the identity of “these little ones.” Since Jesus was speaking to His disciples, and since He was describing the responsibilities of those who were in a position of influence and leadership, it seems reasonable to think that “these little ones” refer to newer and less mature followers. Caring for, and being examples for, individuals who are being called into God's family is a great responsibility.

By using the phrase, “little ones,” Jesus was expressing His concern for their well-being. Individuals who are open to the teachings of Jesus and are considering a relationship with Him need proper guidance and encouragement. Jesus does not want any of His “little ones” to be hurt by individuals who claim to be disciples, but who set a bad example. It’s true that each person is responsible for his own sin, but there is a sense in which those who are more mature in the faith bear responsibility for those who are seekers or who are new in their faith. Thus Jesus warned His disciples, “Watch yourselves,” “Be on your guard!” “Don’t be guilty of harming others.”

There is another responsibility that disciples have. Just as it is necessary for disciples to not put obstructions in the way of others, it is also necessary for them to be accountable for their actions toward one another, and to maintain good relationships with other believers. Jesus said, “If a brother sins, he is to be rebuked,” and “If the brother repents, then he is to be forgiven.” When disciples do wrong to one another in the course of their interactions, they are expected to work things out in a God-pleasing and satisfactory way.

Ideally, when attention is drawn to an offence, the offender will repent, and when there is evidence of repentance, then forgiveness will be extended. The assumption behind such mutual accountability is the commitment to pursue righteousness towards God and to maintain a close interpersonal relationship with other believers.

Jesus used the term “your brother” to describe the close relationship which He wanted His disciples to have with one another. Jesus was not implying that His disciples were to go around rebuking sinful people in general, but only those who were closely identified with Himself — those who were members of God’s family. It is possible for believers to both knowingly and unknowingly offend each other, but no matter what the reason is, the offended disciple is not to condemn and shun the other, but to take the initiative and bring the offense to the attention of the other party. In the parallel passage in Matthew, Jesus said, “If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over” (*Matthew 18:15*).

This step of confrontation is too often neglected and ignored by believers out of fear and timidity. Too many believers would rather walk away from a strained relationship than to deal with their differences with another believer. All too often, we are eager to gossip about our complaints to acquaintances who have no connection with the incident. All too seldom do we go to the person who was the source of the problem. Our typical approach to an offense only makes matters worse.

Jesus clearly stated, “If your brother sins (and the implication is “sins against you”), then you are to rebuke him.” The purpose of the rebuke is to bring the wayward brother or sister to the realization that certain actions were of a sinful nature. If the offender repents, he is to be forgiven. Whether seven times a day or, as stated in Matthew (*18:21*), “seventy times seven,” forgiveness must be granted since the goal is to restore and preserve relationships within the community of disciples.

This does not mean that we are to go around rebuking others for every minor offense. Often, both in the church and in our families, we need to act with more “humility and gentleness, with patience, showing forbearance to one another in love.” That quotation is from the Apostle Paul (*Ephesians 4:2*). Paul also wrote, “We who are strong ought to bear the weaknesses of those without strength and not just please ourselves” (*Romans 15:1*).

Mature believers should be strong enough to absorb and overlook the petty offences of others, especially those offences which are unintentional. Unintended offenses are very common among us. We need to keep in mind the truth that God has shown us grace; therefore we should show grace to others.

At this point in their conversation, the Apostles may have felt incapable of measuring up to such standards of behavior. After all, it is not always easy to consistently interact with other believers in a gracious manner. We have such different personalities, interests, preferences, skills, and other characteristics that affect the ways we think and work together. The Apostles recognized this and pleaded, "Lord, increase our faith!" "Help us to do what You want us to do."

In His response, Jesus informed them that it was not actually a matter of how much faith was needed to do what He wanted them to do, but of the correct kind of faith. The matter is not so much our great faith in God, but rather faith in a great God. The grain of mustard seed is very small, which makes Jesus' statement an appropriate metaphor for the amount of faith needed to accomplish what is seemingly impossible.

Jesus referred to "mustard seeds" several times in His teachings. It was the smallest seed used by the gardeners in the region. Under favorable conditions it could grow to a height of ten or more feet, making it the largest of all garden plants. In His teachings, Jesus was not just calling attention to the size of the seed, but to the life and vitality such a small seed could have. It was this life and vitality which was needed in the faith of the disciples.

The mulberry tree was a tenacious species with an extensive root system which made it difficult to uproot. It grew to a height of about 35 feet. The point of verse 6 is that the exercise of a small amount of living faith can accomplish tasks and overcome problems that would normally be considered difficult or even impossible. Disciples were not to fret about how limited was their faith; they had only to apply what they had and watch it work.

I want to add here that the followers of Jesus did not actually acquire this kind of faith until they were filled with the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Since that day, all true believers possess the Source of faith, the Holy Spirit, which enables them to perform remarkable and even supernatural deeds needed for the expansion of the kingdom of God on earth.

The fourth topic in these verses concerns the servant role of disciples. The world's idea of success is to have power and prestige, to be in a position to lord it over others. That was the attitude of the Pharisees. The way of Jesus' disciples was to be the reverse. On another occasion Jesus announced "Whoever wants to be greatest among you must be the servant of all" (*Matthew 20:26*). Jesus was Himself an example of servanthood. He said that He had not "come to be served, but to serve others and to give His life as a ransom for many" (*Matthew 20:28*).

The circumstances described by Jesus in verses 7 through 10 were fairly common in Israel. A servant was expected to do whatever was necessary to meet the needs of the master, and to put the needs of the master ahead of his own personal desires and needs. After a long day of toil in the fields or looking after sheep, the duties of the servant were still not completed. There was a meal to prepare and serve. The master would not permit the servant to have a few minutes to relax. The servant would have time for himself only after all the needs of the master had been met.

Last week we thought about the passage in which Jesus told a large crowd of people, "If you don't put Me first in your relationships, first in your ambitions and behaviors, first in your priorities and values, then you cannot be My disciple" (*Luke 14:25-33 paraphrased*). In these verses in chapter 17, Jesus added another condition: His disciples must put service to Him ahead of their personal concerns.

And not only that, the servants/disciples of Jesus must not expect to be thanked as if they had done something special, something beyond the call of duty. Verses 9 and 10 call attention to the proper attitude of a disciple: they should not expect praise or recognition for doing what the Lord Jesus wanted them to do. A servant was not in a position to demand honor and reward for doing what he was told to do. For this reason, after disciples have loyally and successfully carried out their responsibilities for their Master, Jesus Christ, they must humbly recognize that they had only used their time, energies, and efforts in non-exceptional ways appropriate to their calling.

Other passages of Scripture indicate that God will reward faithful service done for His sake, but what God gives by way of reward is given out of grace and not because His people earn it or deserve it. From the human standpoint, disciples can only live in thankfulness and humility, recognizing that it is a privilege to have the opportunity to serve the Lord Jesus. The servants of God know that they are obligated to Him because He is their Creator and Redeemer. Disciples understand how much God has done for them; and that they can do no less than serve Him out of gratitude, obedience, and love.

A disciple:

Doesn't cause others to sin (he or she is a positive influence)

Forgives others

Puts faith to work

Serves willingly and joyfully