

Luke 17:5-10

¹ He said to his disciples, “Things that cause sin will inevitably occur, but woe to the person through whom they occur. ² It would be better for him if a millstone were put around his neck and he be thrown into the sea than for him to cause one of these little ones to sin. ³ Be on your guard! If your brother sins, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. ⁴ And if he wrongs you seven times in one day and returns to you seven times saying, ‘I am sorry,’ you should forgive him.”

[The Sunday reading begins here]

⁵ And the apostles said to the Lord, “Increase our faith.” ⁶ The Lord replied, “If you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you would say to (this) mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea,’ and it would obey you. ⁷ “Who among you would say to your servant who has just come in from plowing or tending sheep in the field, ‘Come here immediately and take your place at table’? ⁸ Would he not rather say to him, ‘Prepare something for me to eat. Put on your apron and wait on me while I eat and drink. You may eat and drink when I am finished’? ⁹ Is he grateful to that servant because he did what was commanded? ¹⁰ So should it be with you. When you have done all you have been commanded, say, ‘We are unprofitable servants; we have done what we were obliged to do.’”

Context

Throughout the previous chapter (Luke 16), Jesus has addressed the Pharisees and scribes (scholars of the law) with beginning and ending parables: the dishonest steward and the rich man and Lazarus – each begins with a statement, “*There was a rich man.*” The clear target were the lovers of money, i.e., those whose love of riches prevented them from truly being lovers of God. Although the parables are aimed at the Pharisees the lesson continues a theme of 12:1 “*Beware of the leaven--that is, the hypocrisy--of the Pharisees.*” The disciples are reminded of the characteristics of true discipleship and well as the pitfalls along the way.

In addition, looking ahead to Luke 17:11: “*As Jesus continued his journey to Jerusalem...*” it is clear that Luke will return to a travel motif to tell the narrative. It is as though v.11 marks a new subsection within the longer travel narrative (9:51-19:48). Joel Green holds that 17:1-10 marks the end of lengthy question that began in 13:10, namely, “who will participate in the kingdom of God?” (Green, *Luke*, 611). If this is true, then clearly there two characteristics emphasized are faith and service.

In Luke 17 the audience for the lesson is the disciples (v.1). Luke draws together four sayings:

- a warning against causing others to stumble (vv.1-2), ¹
- a challenge to be forgiving (vv.4-5), ²
- a call to the exercise of faith (vv.5-10) ³, and
- a reminder of the duties of discipleship (vv.11-19; *next Sunday’s gospel*) ⁴

They seem to be disparate sayings, almost as though thrown together, lacking a thematic

¹ See parallels in Matthew 18:6-7 and Mark 9:42

² See parallel in Matthew 18:15

³ vv.5-6 are paralleled in Matthew 17:20. Luke 17:7-10 are unique to Luke

⁴ Unique to Luke

coherence. But in the broader question of “who will participate in the kingdom of God?” the coherence may be as simple as “don’t be like the Pharisees” especially in their lack of regard of the “*little ones*” (v.2).

Commentary

Things That Scandalize

¹ *He said to his disciples, “Things that cause sin will inevitably occur, but woe to the person through whom they occur. ² It would be better for him if a millstone were put around his neck and he be thrown into the sea than for him to cause one of these little ones to sin.*

These two sayings are connected by the words *skandala* (v. 1) and *skandalizo* (v. 2). The original meaning of this word group *skandal-* was “trap;” or, more specifically a trap’s tripping mechanism. The word group is used to translate the Hebrew *próskomma*, meaning both “trap” and “stumbling block” or, “cause of ruin.” In the latter sense, this transferred to the religious setting to mean “cause of sin.” But is “cause of sin” the best translation here? Paul says that “Christ crucified is a stumbling block (*skándalon*) to the Jews (1 Cor 1:23) and describes the cross as a stumbling block (*skándalon*) (Galatians 5:11). Consider three other modern gospel translations, all noted for faithful adherence to translation.

¹“Occasions for stumbling are bound to come, but woe to anyone by whom they come! ² It would be better for you if a millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea than for you to cause one of these little ones to stumble.” (NRSV)

¹“It is inevitable that stumbling blocks come, but woe to him through whom they come! ² “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.” (NASB)

“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.” (ESV)

Either “stumble” or “cause to sin” are valid translations. I would suggest “stumble” given the context of these verses following Jesus’ warnings (direct and via parable) against injustice, indifference, and a lack of hospitality towards those in need – “*the little ones*,” e.g., Lazarus (16:19-31), the prodigal son (15:11-32), and the poor, crippled, blind and lame (14:12-14). All of these demonstrated behaviors are hostile and in opposition to the Reign of God where the invitation is for all. To set up barriers that keep some outside the kingdom is to become a stumbling block of witness for all – especially those who would be found and restored to the community (cf. Luke 15:1-10, the parables of the lost and found).

With the graphic image of the millstone (see note below), Jesus says it would be better to drown than to become the barrier to another’s repentance and restoration. The watery death is an echo of the fate that befell the rich man (16:24-28) who suffered eternal, fiery torment.

When to Rebuke, When to Forgive?

³ *Be on your guard! If your brother sins, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. ⁴ And if he wrongs you seven times in one day and returns to you seven times saying, ‘I am sorry,’ you should forgive him.”*

The disciples are warned to be on guard lest they become like the Pharisees. Several translations take the term *adelphos* as “disciple” but our translation does well to let it be literal as “brothers”

[and sisters], retaining the communal kinship brought about by their common faith and service. Jesus is stressing that even individual sin has a communal element in that the sin of one may lead others astray. This sense of community is made clear in the Matthean parallel:

¹⁵ “If your brother sins (against you), go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have won over your brother. ¹⁶ If he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, so that ‘every fact may be established on the testimony of two or three witnesses.’ ¹⁷ If he refuses to listen to them, tell the church. If he refuses to listen even to the church, then treat him as you would a Gentile or a tax collector” (Mt 18:15–17).

Sin poses a serious obstacle to the sinner and the community, but so too is the necessity of forgiveness – even in the event of multiple occurrences. The responsibility in this verse falls not upon the penitent person to demonstrate that repentance as genuine, but upon the disciple to demonstrate that he or she is capable of following Jesus’ command to forgive. Matthew 18:21-22 extends the teaching into the realm of hyperbole with “*Not seven times, but I tell you seventy times seven.*” Such are the high standards of the reign of God.

Brian Stoffregen writes:

“Who benefits most from forgiving? I think that it is the forgiver who benefits most. Holding grudges, living with resentments, can eat away at one’s life. The desire to get even can consume all of one’s energy. Forgiveness means “letting go” of all of that from one’s life. Forgiving others doesn’t undo the damage they might have done. Forgiving others doesn’t proclaim that what they did was all right. Sin is wrong. Forgiving it doesn’t turn it into a right. Forgiving others means that one will no longer let the past damage continue to control one’s own life in the present. It means giving up all hope of trying to change the past. It means living a new life in the present.

“The “sinner” may not ask for forgiveness. The “sinner” may not repent or admit his/her wrongs. The “sinner” may not accept the forgiveness. But, often for one’s own mental and spiritual health, forgiving the “sinner” is necessary. As Jesus was dying on the cross, he forgave those who were killing him. Did they ask for it? Did they repent of their wrongs? Did they accept it? We don’t know. We know that Jesus forgave them. Forgiving isn’t always easy. There are people we may not want to forgive. So we pray, “Give us more faith,” so that we might be more forgiving.”

Praying for Faith

Why do the apostles make the request: “*Increase our faith*”? Does their request indicate that one can have more or less faith? If one remembers that *pístis* (“faith”) is also translated as “trust” then our own experience is that indeed with can trust to different degrees. But what was it that indicated their faith was somehow lacking? Jesus commissioned them and sent them out with power over demons and diseases (9:1-6). They preached and healed; went about without any supplies of their own. They had trusted God for their necessities. They trusted God to heal the sick and cast out demons. They trusted God and proclaimed the coming Kingdom of God. Why do they now ask for more faith? Did they need more faith to stand up to temptations to sin? To cease from causing others to sin? To rebuke those who had sinned against them? To forgive one another? Perhaps moving mulberry trees (or mountains as in the parallels) into the sea is an easier act of faith than moving us to “rebuke” and “forgive” people who have sinned against us.

Culpepper (*Luke*, 322) writes on this verse:

The disciples' plea in this context conveys the recognition that on the one hand faith is a dynamic process and one can grow in faith. On the other hand, the disciples ask that the Lord add to or strengthen their faith, thereby recognizing that faith is not just a matter of their own strength. In both of these aspects, Luke's concept of faith is similar to Paul's who writes of righteousness as being revealed "through faith for faith" (Rom 1:17) and declares that we have been saved by grace through faith and that this is not of our own doing (Eph 2:8).

I think that our growth in Christ is nearly always a movement from faith to faith (rather than only from unbelief to faith). While the faith I have today is similar to the faith given at baptism, it is also different. As we grow in our intellectual and physical skills and abilities yet remain the same person, so too, who we are today is both the spiritually same and different than who we were as an infant. Either way we are loved by God.

The Faith of a Mustard Seed

"If you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you would say to (this) mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it would obey you. One might expect Jesus to well receive the request for more faith, but the response seems to imply that the disciples do not (yet) understand the real nature of faith. The saying is grammatically complex in Greek. The first part of verse 6 is a construct that implies the disciples do have the faith, but the second part of the verse contradicts that positive assessment with the implication that the disciples have not yet scratched the surface of the real nature of faith.

The disciples assume that they have faith and they will need more to accomplish what Jesus has taught in vv.1-5. Jesus seems to be saying they don't even have faith in the smallest quantity (hence the reference to the mustard seed). The point is not that they need more faith, but that they need to understand the faith allows God to work in a person's life in ways that defy ordinary human experience. This saying is not about performing extraordinary miracles, but that with even the smallest of faith, God can help them to live by his teachings on discipleship.

[Note: other commentaries suggest that Jesus is affirming their faith – in other words, they do not need more. If they would believe and act on the faith that they already have, then they can rebuke and repent and forgive within the community, it will happen. In essence, he seems to imply that they don't need more faith, but to make use of the faith that they already have. Why the difference? It depends on how one assesses the conditional primary and secondary clauses present in the verse.]

Graced Service

"Who among you would say to your servant who has just come in from plowing or tending sheep in the field, 'Come here immediately and take your place at table'? ⁸ Would he not rather say to him, 'Prepare something for me to eat. Put on your apron and wait on me while I eat and drink. You may eat and drink when I am finished'? ⁹ Is he grateful to that servant because he did what was commanded? ¹⁰ So should it be with you. When you have done all you have been commanded, say, 'We are unprofitable servants; we have done what we were obliged to do.'"

This parable presents an opposite picture of the master and slaves given in Luke 12:37. There the master has been out traveling and when he returns home, he has the slaves sit down to eat and he serves them. There one hears the theme of the great reversals so prevalent in that portion of Luke. Here, Alan Culpepper expresses the meaning of this parable very succinctly: "The

disciples can do what God requires – through faith – but disciples never do more than is required” (324).

Joel Green (*The Gospel of Luke*) writes about this word:

In this script, “thanks” would not refer to a verbal expression of gratitude or social politeness, but to placing the master in debt to the slave. In the master-slave relationship, does the master come to owe the slave special privileges because the slave fulfills his daily duties? Does the slave, through fulfilling his ordinary duties to the master, become his master’s patron? Of course not! Similarly, “worthless slaves” (v. 10) refers to slaves to whom no favor is due (and not to uselessness). [p. 614]

If the apostles have the increased faith, letting God work through them, they can do what is expected of them: stand up to temptations, not causing temptations, rebuking and forgiving those who have sinned against them, repenting of their own misdeeds. Still they have only done what’s expected of them. They shouldn’t expect any special favors from God for being such a good Christian. With such an attitude one would well count themselves among the *little ones*, and truly understand what it is to be a servant of God.

Culpepper continues his reflection:

Nevertheless, God owes us nothing for living good, Christian, lives. God’s favor and blessing are matters of grace -- they cannot be earned. Therefore, when we assume that we can deal with God on the basis of what God owes us, we have made a basic mistake. We have rejected grace as the basis of our relationship to God and based that relationship on our own worth and merit. Grace, by definition, is a free gift. [pp. 323-324]

A Final Thought

These ten verses challenge Christians (a) not to be a hindrance to the discipleship of others, (b) to rebuke those who sin and forgive all who ask for forgiveness, and (c) and when you have done all this not to assume that you have done more than your duty. These ten verses are a reminder that faithfulness, forgiveness and humility are required of those who would be obedient to the Word of Jesus. Perhaps the first two are the most difficult to live, but the lack of humility is perhaps the more dangerous. It prevents us from experiencing the depth of God’s love and likely leads to a superior attitude and false spirituality that becomes an obstacle to the *little ones* and a barrier to being charitable in our forgiveness. Such a pitfall makes clear why St. Bonaventure wrote that *humility is the guardian and gateway to all the other virtues*.

Notes

Luke 17:1 *Things that cause sin*: *skandala*, a cause of offense or stumbling. The word group is used to translate the Hebrew *próskomma*, meaning both “trap” and “stumbling block” or, “cause of ruin” either with idols in view or offenses against the law. As a ground of divine punishment *skándalon* can then denote an occasion of sinning or a temptation to sin.

***will inevitably occur*:** Matthew asserts that it is necessary that sin occurs. Luke notes only that sin is impossible to avoid.

***woe to the person*:** this is the 11th woe spoken by Jesus in Luke’s gospel, but the first directed towards the disciples.

Luke 17:2 *were put around his neck*: The Greek phrase, *perikeitai peri ton trachêlon*, does not refer to tying one end of a rope a person's neck and the other end of the rope to a large mill grinding stone. Rather it literally means to insert the person's head into the hole at the center of the stone – some of which were three to four feet in diameter.

to cause ... to sin: *skandalizō*. See note on 17:1. *Skandalizō* is from the same word group

Luke 17:3 *Be on your guard*: the translation takes Luke 17:3a as the conclusion to the saying on scandal in Luke 17:1–2. It is not impossible that it should be taken as the beginning of the saying on forgiveness in Luke 17:3b–4.

rebuke: *epitimáō* In the OT it is applied especially to God's rebuke (cf. Job 26:11; 2 Sam. 22:16; Pss. 106:9; 119:21). In a limited way it is also used for human rebuke (Gen. 37:10; Ruth 2:16), but human reproof is often held to be presumptuous, and only judicial, pastoral, or fraternal rebuke is commended. In Luke *epitimáō* has an interesting pattern. Prior to this text, it is always Jesus who rebukes: demons or evil spirits (4:35, 41; 9:42); a fever (4:39); the wind and waters (8:24); and his disciples (9:21, 55). After this text, it is always people rebuking others -- and usually being wrong about it: the disciples rebuke those bringing children to Jesus (18:15); the disciples rebuke the blind man yelling after Jesus (18:39); the Pharisees want Jesus to rebuke his yelling disciples (19:39); and the criminal on the cross rebukes the other one (23:40)

if he repents: *metanoēsē* to change one's way of life as the result of a complete change of thought and attitude with regard to sin and righteousness.

Luke 17:5 *Increase our faith*: Literally, "add faith to us." The text gives no reason for the request. Possible conclusions are (a) the request to increase faith is given as a response to the high demands of forgiveness (vv.3-4) and to avoid scandal to the little ones (vv.1-2). Or (b) these verse sets are unconnected and Luke has inserted this material here as a separate thought.

Luke 17:6 *If you have faith the size of a mustard seed*: In Greek there is a "future conditional clause": "If you were to have the faith of a mustard seed ..." implying that you don't have that faith now (Matt 17:20). There is also an "according to present reality conditional clause": "If you have the faith of a mustard seed [and you do] ..." (Luke 17:6). Luke seems to be affirming that they have the faith to do what is expected of them (the theme of vv. 7-10).

you would say to (this) mulberry tree: Yet the construct of the second half of the verse implies, that in fact they do not have the faith to do what is expected of them.

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