Text: Luke 17:1-10
Title: Humble Faith for Life
Truth: Develop a lively, forgiving faith by which you happily serve God and take care not to cause others to stumble.
Date/Location: Sunday December 8, 2024 at FBC

Review of an Important Principle

Recall the last verse in chapter 16, where Abraham (and Jesus) said that if someone does not hear Moses and the prophets, they will not be persuaded even if someone rises from the dead. This is strange because you would think that a spectacular event like a resurrection would have a lot of persuasive power. But the problem is not in the type of evidence that is offered, for both the resurrection of Christ *and* the word of God in Old and New Testaments are clear and persuasive. The problem is in the person seeing or hearing the evidence.

In Ezekiel 12:2, God says this: "Son of man, you dwell in the midst of a rebellious house, which has eyes to see but does not see, and ears to hear but does not hear; for they are a rebellious house." God pins problem on the rebellious nature of the people. When a person is rebellious against what God has taught them, it is like they have a disease which crusts over their eyes and blocks up their ears with severe congestion. Spiritually, they have a condition that prevents them from hearing and seeing and understanding God's revelation.

Think about this for yourself. If you are rebelling against something that God is asking you, or telling you, or teaching you—say through another person, or your spouse, or your pastor, or a Christian friend, this does not bode well for your future reception of the revelation of God. A little rebellion goes a long way to damage your eyes and ears. Be careful to be teachable, to listen, to inquire, to learn of the Lord. Do not push back against Him. For if you do not hear what God has said to you already in written form, you will almost certainly not receive other formats of revelation. And then, even that which you *have* will be taken away.

Introduction

At first read, Luke chapter 17 opens with ten verses that may seem to be a collection of four disconnected paragraphs. But the way Luke presents it, Jesus spoke about these things together on one occasion and I think we can suggest a connection between them.

I. Avoid Setting Snares for Others, v. 1-2

A. We may read this text as if it is talking about terrible people who conspire to keep others away from the faith. The parallel passage in Matthew 18:6-7 inclines our minds to think of someone who does something to small children that would prevent them from entering the kingdom of heaven. But neither text limits the offender or the offense in that way. The offender need not be a terrible persecutor, nor does the offense need to prevent the victim from being saved. Furthermore, "little ones" is not limited to small children. These are little ones in the sense of disciples born into God's family, perhaps with a focus on those young in the faith.

B. I advise we improve our reading of this by considering it a bit more broadly, in such a way that we consider whether *we ourselves* could be one who causes an offense or snare or temptation or hindrance to others. And then, as we read it this way, we consider what kinds of sins we could be causing others to commit—not just "keeping them out of the kingdom," "really bad" sins.

This is a tough assignment because we must really take stock. We must love others more than ourselves, lest we complain, "why is my liberty is judged by another man's conscience?" (1 Cor. 10:29). What we do can have an enormous impact on other people. A "let go of the steering wheel" mentality can lead us to do things that seriously damage others. Romans 14:15 and 1 Cor. 8:11 caution us against doing anything, even things that are otherwise fine to do, if those things will cause our weaker brothers to stumble or fall.

C. Note the inevitability of offenses and temptations. It is impossible to avoid them in this life. We are in this sinful world. But we do not need to add to the unnecessary burden already present here. Unbelievers are going to cause stumbling of Christ's followers. But

Christ's followers should not be causing stumbling of other of His followers!

If someone brings temptation into the lives of others, Christ pronounces a "woe" upon that person. This is a prophetic statement that expresses an expectation of severe judgment for a person who does this sort of thing.

D. The result is so bad that it would be best if the person who caused the offense were not permitted to cause it in the first place, by being tied to a millstone and thrown into the sea and drowned. A millstone is a large stone used for milling grain. It was so large that it would be mounted on a rotating axel and turned by a large animal such as a mule or ox. But Jesus says that this fate—as terrible as it is—would be better than God's eventual judgment on him for casting a hindrance into the life of another person.

E. God takes it very seriously when someone messes with His children. We must not be a stumbling-block-thrower (Romans 14:13). We must pursue edification, not destruction (Rom. 14:19, 15:2, 1 Cor. 8:13). But we must also be able to manage if we are on the receiving end of a stumbling block.

II. Deal with Sin Directly and Kindly, v. 3-4

A. Even though God will judge those who cause sin, the nature of this world is that snares will inevitably come from all directions. This means that we need to be ready to handle them well, and particularly so if a Christian brother or sister sins against us.

B. The phrase "Take heed to yourselves" or "Pay attention to yourselves" is at the start of verse three, but I think it applies well to the prior verse as well. Pay attention to how you handle situations like this—that you are not the offender, *and* that you are not one who mishandles someone else sinning against you. Do not stumble when someone sins against you, and do not ignore the sin either.

C. Instead, the Lord directs us to rebuke the brother that sins. I think this it is reasonable to add here that you do not "take offense" unnecessarily when you experience a minor kind of annoyance or even offense. Love covers over those things (Prov. 10:12, 1 Peter

4:8). If possible, overlook it. If the person was just being dumb, or possibly misspoke or does not make a habit of sinning against people, I can overlook it.

D. Rebuke sounds like a very strong word. I think many of us like to avoid rebuking anyone. We like to run away from potential conflict. "Live and let live." But this is not what the Lord Jesus says. If someone sins against you, *go and talk to them about it*. Be gentle about it (Galatians 6:1), not harsh.

E. If when you talk to the person about their sin they repent, then Jesus commands you to forgive him. Pay attention to yourself at this point—forgiveness "is not just so easy" (a favorite phrase from our retired missionary pastor Perry Reddy). If the sinner repents, now the ball is in your court. An important responsibility has shifted to you.

Take heed to yourself that you are not demanding a works-based forgiveness from the offender. If the person sins against you a few times today or repeatedly over the week, it is not your job to police them by saying that if they repeat their error that means they did not really repent. You might even have a mindset of offering a provisional forgiveness whereby you say, "If you do not do it again, I forgive you this offense." If they do it again, then you "claw back" the forgiveness for a previous offense. That is not forgiveness! You might retort, "Sorry is what sorry does" but that is not true because the person who offended you is in a battle like Paul was in Romans 7. The same sin may well come up again and again. In fact, *you* are in that same battle and have sinned the same way over and over yourself. And lack of genuine, gracious forgiveness is itself a sin. Your forgiveness of others needs to be based on grace, not on works, not just like God's forgiveness of you is not based on your works.

F. The extent of forgiveness is to be unlimited. The number seven is meant to indicate there is no limit: particularly if you consider Matthew 18:21-22. I have not experienced someone sinning against me seven times in a day and coming back and repenting seven times. If they did, I would be obligated—in accordance with Jesus's words here—to forgive that person. How often has that

happened to you? So even if we stop at *seven*, the practical reality is that this does not happen. When you bump it to 70 times seven, then you realize that the Lord is just telling us to be forgiving people.

How many sins did you do, say yesterday, for which God forgave you? Last week? If God stopped at seven, where would we be?

III. Seek Greater Faith, v. 5-6

A. The care that we must take to avoid causing our fellow brothers and sisters to sin *and* the responsibility to be forgiving toward those who sin against us caused the disciples to ask for a boost in their faith. "Add to our faith!" The Lord has exacting standards compared to our normal earthly existence. It is going to take faith to live on that level.

B. Jesus replies in effect that they do not need a lot of faith—just a little bit. We often say that this little bit of faith must be placed in the right Persons—God and Christ. And that is true.

C. Expand your horizon on that idea by thinking about this: a mustard seed is *alive*. It has life in it. At the right time, it begins to "unfold" itself, using its internal stored energy and drawing from its environment the nutrients it needs. It can in fact move through and around and even push things out of its way. It grows to the size of a small tree and the birds can nest in its branches (Luke 13:19).

D. What we need is not just a *small* faith in the correct "object." What we need is a *living* faith. We need a faith that works (James 2:17), a genuine faith, a praying faith. That kind of faith can, small though it is, move mountains and overcome obstacles. Now, you will not actually move a mountain if the mountain does not need to be moved, or if it is not God's will for the mountain to be moved. But it can accomplish great things for God by praying for God's power and by obeying God.

IV. Serve the Lord with Humility, v. 7-10

A. We are servants of God. Even if we are not Christians, we are subservient to God and He will make use of us as He sees fit (Isaiah

44:28 says this of a world ruler, Cyrus). But as Christians, we are servants of God in a special sense, a willing sense.

B. If we do have strong faith, and can handle offenses, and are not frequently giving out offenses, we might get a big head and think that we are entitled to special treatment.

C. The Lord illustrates with a man who has a servant who comes in from the day's work. The master does not serve the servant; rather the servant continues to serve the master at the table, and then later can take care of his own nutrition.

D. The servant does not expect a thanks for what he has done. He has the thanks in his wages, in his room and board, in the stability and protection that he enjoys under the master.

E. In comparable manner, we are to consider ourselves as servants of God. "We are unprofitable servants." We think of ourselves with humility. We do not add anything to God. We do not serve with an expectation of honor or to earn merit with God. We are just doing our duty.

F. Not recorded in this passage is the truth that God does not treat us with disrespect, and He will remember our work and labor of love which we have done for His name's sake (Heb. 6:10), and He will reward us at the judgment seat of Christ for faithful service. But we do not serve Him for gain. We serve Him for love and gratitude.

Conclusion

The four sections do indeed tie together, the fourth one at least loosely but the first three quite tightly. We must take every caution to build up our fellow man, not cause him to stumble. We must be able to handle offenses when they come our way, even helping the brother by (gently!) rebuking his sin. This takes faith, but with just a little living faith in Christ like the life in a mustard seed, we can be successful. But we must not let our heads get big and start thinking that God serves us; rather, we serve God and will always do so.

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